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THE WORKS OF

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

EDITED BY

SIR HERBERT MAXWELL, BART.

VOLUME XI.

THE WHITE ROSE

"The Booby" comes to grief at the last hurdle.

Frontispiece.

THE WHITE ROSE

BY

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY HARRINGTON BIRD

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THE WHITE ROSE

THE WHITE ROSE

CHAPTER I

THE MAN IN THE STREET

IT was dawn—dawn here in London, almost as cool and clear as in the pleasant country, where the bird was waking in the garden and the tall poplar stirred and quivered in the morning breeze. It was dawn on the bold outline of the inland hills, dawn on the dreary level of the deep, dark sea. Night after night daylight returns to nature, as sorrow after sorrow hope comes back to man. Even in the hospital—say St. George's Hospital, for that was nearest to where I stood—the bright-eyed morning stole in to greet a score of sufferers, who had longed for her coming through weary hours of pain, to welcome her arrival as nurse, physician, friend; and although on one dead, upturned face the grey light shed a greyer, ghastlier gleam—what then?—a spirit had but broken loose from last night's darkness, and departed in the tremble of twilight for the land beyond the grave, the place of everlasting day. It was dawn, too, in the long perspective of the silent streets—silent none the less for the booted tramp of an occasional policeman, for the rumbling of a belated cab, for shifting figures flitting like ghosts round distant corners—squalid, restless, degraded, and covered far too scantily with aught but shame. And it was dawn in the principal rooms of one of the best houses in London, filled with the great ones of the earth, or as they term themselves somewhat presumptuously, with "none but the best people"—a dawn less welcome here than in deep copse or breezy

upland, than on the wide, lone sea in the hushed ward of the hospital, or among the narrow streets—greeted, indeed, as a deliverer only by a few outwearied chaperons, and perhaps by the light-fingered musicians, who had still an endless *cotillon* to work through before they could cover up their instruments and go to bed.

I had been down to supper—that is to say, I had stretched my arm over a white shoulder for half a tumbler of champagne and seltzer-water (the *latter* good of its kind), and had absorbed most of it in my glove, whilst I ministered at the same time to the wants of a stately dame whom I remember—ah! so long ago—the slimmest and the lightest mover that ever turned a partner's head in a waltz (we did not call them round dances then), and whom I now contemplate, when we meet, with mingled feelings of respect, astonishment, and gratitude for deliverance from possible calamity. She was not satisfied with champagne and seltzer-water, far from it—though she drank that mixture with gratification too: but wisely restored vitality after the fatigues of the evening by a substantial supper, and I am not sure but that she had earned her provender fairly enough.

"You must take me back now, please," she said, "or the girls won't know where to find me!"

I wonder whether she thought of the time when *her* mamma didn't know where to find *us*, and the scolding she got in the carriage going home. I was sure she must have had it by the black looks and stiff bow I myself encountered in the Park next day.

Dear! dear! was there ever any state of society in which youthful affections, fancies, attachments, call them what you will, were of a material to withstand the wear of a little time, a little absence, a good deal of amusement bordering on dissipation? Would such an Arcadia be pleasant or wearisome, or is it simply impossible? Alas! I know not; but as far as my own observation goes, you may talk of your first love as poetically as you please—it's your last love that comes in and makes a clean sweep of everything on the board.

I need scarcely observe, this is not the remark I made as we laboured heavily up Lady Billesdon's staircase, and parted at a doorway crowded to suffocation half an hour ago, but affording fair ingress and egress now, for the company were departing; coarse voices announced that carriages "stopped the way," or their owners were "coming out"; while the linkman, with a benevolence beyond all praise,

hoped "her Grace had not forgotten him," and that "the young ladies enjoyed their ball!"

It was time for the young ladies to go, unless perhaps they were very young indeed, quite in their first season. Through the open squares of the ballroom windows a grey gap in the sky, already tinged with blue, was every moment widening into day. Lamps, and bright eyes too, began to wear a faded lustre, while the pale morning light, creeping along the passages and staircase, seemed to invade the company, dancers and all, like some merciless epidemic from which there was no escape. Perhaps this might account for much of the hooding, wrapping-up, and general hurry of departure.

To a majority of the performers, besides those who have been fulfilling a duty and are glad it is over, I am not sure but that this same going away constitutes the pleasantest part of a ball. In a gathering of which amusement is the ostensible object, it is strange how many of the stronger and more painful feelings of our nature can be aroused by causes apparently trivial in themselves, but often leading to unlooked-for results. How many a formal greeting masks a heart that thrills, and a pulse that leaps, to the tone of somebody's voice, or the rustle of somebody's dress! How many a careless inquiry, being interpreted, signifies a volume of protestation or a torrent of reproach! With what electric speed can eager eyes, from distant corners, flash the expected telegram along the wires of mutual intelligence, through a hundred unconscious bystanders, and make two people happy who have not exchanged one syllable in speech! There is no end to "the hopes and fears that shake a single ball"; but it is when the ball is nearly over, and the cloaking for departure begins, that the hopes assume a tangible form and the fears are satisfactorily dispelled. It is so easy to explain in low, pleading whispers why such a dance was refused, or such a cavalier preferred under the frown of authority, or in fear of the *convênances*; so pleasant to lean on a strong arm, in a nook not only sheltered from doorway draughts, but a little apart from the stream of company, while a kind hand adjusts the folds of the burnoose with tender care, to be rewarded by a hasty touch, a gentle pressure, perhaps a flower, none the less prized that it has outlived its bloom. How precious are such moments, and how fleeting! Happy indeed if protracted ever so little by the fortunate coincidence of a footman from the country, a coachman fast asleep on his box, and a carriage that never comes till long after it has been called!

I stood at the top of Lady Billesdon's staircase and watched the usual business with an attention partly flagging from weariness, partly diverted in the contemplation of my hostess herself, whose pluck and endurance, while they would have done honour to the youngest Guardsmen present, were no less extraordinary than admirable in an infirm old lady of threescore. Without counting a dinner-party (to meet Royalty), she had been under arms, so to speak, for more than five hours, erect at the doorway of her own ball-room, greeting her guests, one by one, as they arrived, with unflagging cordiality, never missing the bow, the hand-shake, nor the right thing said to each. On her had devolved the ordering, the arrangements, the whole responsibility of the entertainment, the invitations accorded—above all, the invitations denied! And now she stood before me, that great and good woman, without a quiver of fatigue in her eyelids, an additional line of care on her quiet matronly brow.

It was wonderful! It must have been something more than enthusiasm that kept her up, something of that stern sense of duty which fixed the Roman soldier at his post when the boiling deluge swept a whole population before it, and engulfed pleasant, wicked Pompeii in a sea of fire. But it was her own kind heart that prompted the hope I had been amused, and the pleasant "good-night" with which she replied to my farewell bow and sincere congratulations (for she was an old friend) on the success of her ball.

Lady Billesdon, and those like her who give large entertainments, at endless trouble and expense, for the amusement of their friends, deserve more gratitude from the charming young people of both sexes who constitute the rising generation of society in London than these are inclined to admit. It is not to be supposed that an elderly lady of orderly habits, even with daughters to marry, can derive much enjoyment from a function which turns her nice house out of windows, and keeps her weary self afoot and waking till six o'clock in the morning; but if people whose day for dancing has gone by did not thus sacrifice their comfort and convenience to the pleasures of their juniors, I will only ask the latter to picture to themselves what a dreary waste would be the London season, what a desolate round of recurring penance would seem parks, shoppings, operas, and those eternal dinners, unrelieved by a single ball!

Some such reflections as these so engrossed my attention as I went downstairs, mechanically fingering the latch-key in my waistcoat-pocket, that I am ashamed to say I inadvert-

ently trod on the dress of a lady in front of me, and was only made aware of my awkwardness when she turned her head, and with a half-shy, half-formal bow accosted me by name.

"It is a long time since we have met," she said, detaching herself for a moment from the arm of a good-looking man who was taking her to her carriage, while she put her hand out, and added, "but I hope you have not quite forgotten me."

Forgotten her! a likely thing, indeed, that any man between sixteen and sixty, who had ever known Leonora Welby, should forget her while he retained his senses! I had not presence of mind to exclaim, as a good-for-nothing friend of mine always does on such occasions, "I wish I could!" but, reflecting that I had been three hours in the same house without recognising her, I bowed over the bracelet on her white arm, stupefied, and when I recovered my senses, she had reached the cloakroom, and disappeared.

"'Gad, how well she looks to-night!" said a hoarse voice behind me; "none of the young ones can touch her even now. It's not the same form, you see—not the same form."

"She? who?" I exclaimed; for my wits were still wool-gathering.

"Who? why, Mrs. Vandeleur!" was the reply. "You needn't swagger as if you didn't know her, when she turned round on purpose to shake hands with you—a thing I haven't seen her do for half a dozen men this season. I am a good bit over fifty, my boy; and till I've bred a horse that can win the Derby, I don't mean to turn my attention to anything else; but I can tell you, if she did as much for me twice in a week, I shouldn't know whether I was standing on my grey head or my gouty heels. She's a witch—that's what she is: and you and I are old enough to keep out of harm's way. Good-night!"

Old Cotherstone was right. She *was* a witch; but how different from, and oh! how infinitely more dangerous than, the witches our forefathers used to gag, and drown, and burn, without remorse. She was coming out of the cloakroom again, still haunted by that good-looking young gentleman, who was probably over head and ears in love with her, and I could stare at her without rudeness now, from my post of observation on the landing. Yes, it was no wonder I had not recognised her; though the dark pencilled eyebrows and the deep-fringed eyes were Norah Welby's, it was hardly possible to believe that this high-bred, queenly, beautiful woman could be the laughing, light-hearted girl I remembered in her father's parsonage some ten or fifteen years ago.

She was no witch then. She was a splendid enchantress now. There was a magic in the gleam that tinged her dark chestnut hair with gold; magic in the turn of her small head, her delicate temples, her chiseled features, her scornful, self-reliant mouth, and the depth of her large, dark, loving eyes. Every movement of the graceful neck, of the tall, lithe figure, of the shapely limbs, denoted pride, indeed, but it was a pride to withstand injury, oppression, misfortune, insult, all the foes that could attack it from without, and to yield only at the softening touch of love.

As she walked listlessly to her carriage, taking, it seemed to me, but little heed of her companion, I imagined I could detect in a certain weariness of step and gesture the tokens of a life unsatisfied, a destiny incomplete. I wonder what made me think of Sir Walter Raleigh flinging down his gold-embroidered cloak, the only precious thing he possessed, at the feet of the maiden queen? The young adventurer doubtless acted on a wise calculation and a thorough knowledge of human, or at least of feminine, nature; but there is here and there a woman in the world for whom a man flings his very heart down, recklessly and unhesitatingly, to crush and trample if she will. Sometimes she treads it into the mire, but oftener, I think, she picks it up, and takes it to her own breast, a cherished prize, purer, better, and holier for the ordeal through which it has passed.

I had no carriage to take me home, and wanted none. No gentle voice when I arrived there, kind or querulous, as the case might be, to reproach me with the lateness of the hour. Shall I say of this luxury also, that I wanted none? No; buttoning my coat, and reliant on my latch-key, I passed into the grey morning and the bleak street as Mrs. Vandeleur's carriage drove off, and the gentleman who had attended her walked back with a satisfied air into the house for his overcoat, and possibly his cigar-case. As he hurried in, he was fastening a white rose in his button-hole. A sister flower, drooping and fading, perhaps from nearer contact with its late owner, lay unnoticed on the pavement. I have seen so many of these vegetables exchanged, particularly towards the close of an entertainment, that I took little notice either of the keepsake, precious and perishable, or its discarded companion; but I remember now to have heard in clubs and other places of resort, how pale beautiful Mrs. Vandeleur went by the name of the White Rose; a title none the less appropriate, that she was supposed to be plentifully girt with thorns, and that many well-known fingers were said to have been

pricked to the bone in their efforts to detach her from her stem.

There is a philosophy in most men towards five in the morning, supposing them to have been up all night, which tends to an idle contemplation of human nature, and indulgent forbearance towards it weaknesses. I generally encourage this frame of mind by the thoughtful consumption of a cigar. Turning round to light one, a few paces from Lady Billesdon's door, I was startled to observe a shabbily dressed figure advance stealthily from the corner of the street, where it seemed to have been on the watch, and pounce at the withered rose, crushed and yellowing on the pavement. As it passed swiftly by me, I noticed the figure was that of a man in the prime of life, but in bad health, and apparently in narrow circumstances. His hair was matted, his face pale, and his worn-out clothes hung loosely from the angles of his frame. He took no heed of my presence, was probably unconscious of it; for I perceived his eyes fill with tears as he pressed the crushed flower passionately to his lips and heart, muttering in broken sentences the while.

I only caught the words, "I have seen you once more, my darling! I swore I would, and it is worth it all!" Then his strength gave way, for he stopped and leaned his head against the area railings of the street. I could see, by the heaving of his shoulders, the man was sobbing like a child. Uncertain how to act, ere I could approach nearer he had recovered himself and was gone.

Could this be her doing? Was Norah Vandeleur indeed a witch, and was nobody to be exempt from her spells? Was she to send home the sleek child of fortune, pleased with the superfluity of a flower and a flirtation too much, while she could not even spare the poor emaciated wretch who had darted on the withered rose she dropped with the avidity of a famished hawk on its prey? What could he be, this man? and what connection could possibly exist between him and handsome, high-bred Mrs. Vandeleur?

All these things I learned afterwards, partly from my own observation, partly from the confessions of those concerned. Adding to my early recollections of Norah Welby the circumstances that came to my knowledge both before and after she changed her name to Vandeleur, I am enabled to tell my tale, such as it is; and I can think of no more appropriate title for the story of a fair and suffering woman than "The White Rose."

CHAPTER II

THE YOUNG IDEA

ON a fine sunshiny morning, not very many years ago two boys—I beg their pardon, two young gentlemen—were sitting in the comfortless pupil-room of a "retired officer and graduate of Cambridge," undergoing the process of being crammed. The retired officer and graduate of Cambridge had disappeared for luncheon, and the two young gentlemen immediately laid aside their books to engage in an animated discussion totally unconnected with their previous studies. It seemed such a relief to unbend the mind after an hour's continuous attention to any subject whatever, that they availed themselves of the welcome relaxation without delay. I am bound to admit their conversation was instructive in the least possible degree.

"I say, Gerard," began the elder of the two, "what's become of Dandy? He was off directly after breakfast, and to-day's his day for 'General Information.' I wonder Nobs stood it, but he lets Dandy do as he likes."

"Nobs," be it observed, was the term of respect by which Mr. Archer was known among his pupils.

"Nobs is an old muff, and Dandy's a swell," answered Gerard, who had tilted his chair on its hindlegs against the wall for the greater convenience of shooting paper-spills at the clock. "I shall be off, too, as soon as I have finished these equations; and I'm afraid, Dolly, you'll have to spend another afternoon by yourself."

He spoke nervously, and stooped so low to pick one of the spills, that it seemed to bring all the blood in his body to his face; but his blushes were lost on Dolly, who looked out of window, and answered tranquilly—

"Like all great men, Gerard, I am never so little alone as when alone—'My Mind to me a thingamy is!' You two fellows have no resources within yourselves. Now I shall slope easily down to the mill, lift the trimmers, smoke a weed with old Grits, and while away the pleasant afternoon with a

pot of mild porter;—peradventure, if Grits is thirsty—of which I make small doubt—we shall accomplish two. And where may you be going, Master Jerry, this piping afternoon? Not across the marshes again, my boy. You've been there twice already this week."

Once more Gerard blushed like a girl, and this time without escaping the observation of his companion; nor was his confusion lessened by the good-humoured malice with which the latter began to sing in a full mellow voice—

"She hath an eye so soft and brown—
'Ware, hare!
She gives a side glance, and looks down—
'Ware, hare!

Master Jerry, she's fooling thee!"

Dolly, whose real name nobody ever called him by, enjoyed a great talent for misquotation, and a tendency to regard life in general from its ludicrous point of view. Otherwise, he was chiefly remarkable for a fat, jovial face; a person to correspond; strong absorbing and digestive faculties; a good-humour that nothing could ruffle; and an extraordinary facility in dismissing useful information from his mind. He was heir to a sufficient fortune, and, if he could pass his examination, his friends intended he should become a Hussar.

Mr. Archer was at this period employed in the preparation of three young gentlemen for the service of her Majesty. Military examinations were then in an early stage of development, but created, nevertheless, strong misgivings in the minds of parents and guardians, not to mention the extreme disgust with which they were viewed by future heroes indisposed to book-learning. It was a great object to find an instructor who could put the required amount of information into a pupil's head in the shortest possible space of time, without reference to its stay there after an examination had been passed, and Mr. Archer was notorious for his success in this branch of tuition. Clever or stupid, idle or industrious, with him it was simply a question of weeks.

"I will put your young gentleman through the mill," he would observe to an anxious father or an over-sanguine mamma; "but whether it takes him three months or six, or a whole year, depends very much upon himself. Natural abilities! there's no such thing! If he will learn, he shall; if he won't, he *must!*"

So Mr. Archer's three small bedrooms, with their white furniture and scanty carpets, never wanted occupants; the

bare, comfortless pupil-room, with its dirty walls and dingy ceiling, never remained empty; and Mr. Archer himself, who was really a clever man, found his banker's account increasing in proportion to his own disgust for history, classics, geometry, engineering—all that had once afforded him a true scholar's delight. It speaks well for learning, and the spells she casts over her lovers, that they can never quite free themselves from her fascinations. Even the over-worked usher of a grammar-school needs but a few weeks' rest to return to his allegiance, and to glory once more in the stern mistress he adores. Mr. Archer, after a few months' vacation, could perhaps take pride and pleasure in the cultivation of his intellect: but at the end of his half-year, jaded, disgusted, and over-worked, he could have found it in his heart to envy the very day-labourer mowing his lawn.

That this military Mentor had enough on his hands may be gathered from the following summary of his pupils:—

First. Granville Burton, a young gentleman of prepossessing appearance, and a florid taste in dress. Antecedents: Eton, two ponies, a servant of his own at sixteen, and a mother who had spoilt him from the day he was born. Handsome, fatherless, and heir to a good property, ever since he could remember he had been nicknamed "Dandy," and was intended for the Life Guards.

Secondly. Charles Egremont, commonly called Dolly, already described.

Lastly. Gerard Ainslie, one of those young gentlemen of whom it is so difficult to predict the future—a lad in years, a man in energy, but almost a woman in feelings. Gifted, indeed, with a woman's quick perceptions and instinctive sense of right, but cursed with her keen affections, her vivid fancy, and painful tendencies to self-torture and self-immolation. Such a character is pretty sure to be popular both with men and boys; also, perhaps, with the other sex. Young Ainslie, having his own way to make in the world, often boasted that he always lit on his legs.

An orphan, and dependent on a great-uncle whom he seldom saw, the army was indeed to be his profession; and to him, far more than either of the others, it was important that he should go up for his examinations with certainty of success. It is needless to observe that he was the idlest of the three. By fits and starts he would take it into his head to work hard for a week at a time—going in for a grind, as he called it—with a vigour and determination that astonished Mr. Archer himself.

"Ainslie," observed that gentleman after one of these efforts, in which his pupil had done twice the usual tasks in half the usual time, "there are two sorts of fools—the fool positive, who can't help himself, and the fool superlative, who won't! You make me think you belong to the latter class. If you would only exert yourself, you might pass in a month from this time."

"I can work, sir, well enough," replied the pupil, "when I have an object."

"An object!" retorted the tutor, lifting his eyebrows in that state of astonishment which is but one degree removed from disgust; "gracious heavens, sir, if your whole success in life, your character, your position, the very bread you eat, is not an object, I should like to know what is!"

Gerard knew, but he wasn't going to tell Mr. Archer; and I think that in this instance the latter showed less than his usual tact and discrimination in the characters of the young.

It was in pursuit of this object no doubt that Gerard finished his equations so rapidly, and put his books on the shelf with a nervous eagerness that denoted more than common excitement, to which Dolly's imperturbable demeanour afforded a wholesome contrast.

"Off again, Jerry," observed the latter, still intent on a mathematical figure requiring the construction of a square and a circle, on which he lavished much unnecessary accuracy and neatness, to the utter disregard of the demonstration it involved; "I envy you, my boy—and yet I would not change places with you after all. You'll have a pleasant journey, like the cove in the poem—

> All in the blue unclouded weather
> Thick-jewelled shone the saddle-leather,
> The helmet and the helmet feather
> Burnt like one burning flame together,
> As he rode down to Camelot.
> 'Tirra-lirra! It's deuced hot,'
> Sang Sir Launcelot.

—That's what I call real poetry, Jerry. I say, I met Tennyson once at my old governor's. He didn't jaw much. I thought him rather a good chap. You've got three miles of it across those blazing marshes. I'll take odds you don't do it in thirty-five minutes—walking, of course, heel and toe."

"Bother!" replied Jerry, and, snatching his hat from its peg, laid his hand on the open window-sill, vaulted through, and was gone.

Dolly returned to his problem, shaking his head with considerable gravity.

"Now, that young chap will come to grief," he soliloquised. "He wants looking after, and who's to look after him? If it was Dandy Burton I shouldn't so much mind. The Dandy can take precious good care of himself. What he likes is to 'get up' awful, and be admired. Wouldn't he just—

> Stand at his diamond-door,
> With his rainbow-frill unfurled,
> And swear if he was uncurled?

Now Jerry's different. Jerry's a good sort, and I don't want to see the young beggar go a mucker for want of a little attention. Grits is a sensible chap enough — I never knew a miller that wasn't. I'll just drop easily down the lane and talk it over with Grits."

In pursuance of which discreet resolution, Dolly — who, although actually the junior, believed himself in wisdom and general experience many years older than his friend — sauntered out into the sunshine with such deliberation that ere he had gone a hundred yards, the other, speeding along as if he trod on air, was already more than half through his journey.

And he *was* treading on air. The long level marshes through which he passed, with their straight banks, their glistening ditches, their wet, luxuriant herbage and hideous pollard willows, would have seemed to you or me but a flat uninteresting landscape, to be tolerated only for the stock it could carry, and the remunerative interest it paid on the capital sunk in drainage per acre; but to Gerard Ainslie it was simply fairyland—the fairyland through which most of us pass, if only for a few paces, at some period of our lives. Few enter it more than once, for we remember when we emerged how cold it was outside; we shudder when we think of the bleak wind that buffeted our bodies and chilled our quivering hearts: we have not forgotten how long it took to harden us for our bleak native atmosphere, and we dare not risk so sad a change again!

The marshes, whether fairyland or pasture, soon disappeared beneath Gerard's light and active footfall. What is a mere league of distance to a well-made lad of nineteen—a runner, a leaper, a cricketer — tolerably in condition, and, above all, very much in love? He was soon in a wooded district, amongst deep lanes, winding footpaths, thick hedges, frequent stiles, and a profusion of wild flowers. He threaded his way as if he knew it well. Presently the colour faded from his cheek and his heart began to beat, for he had

reached a wicket-gate in a high, mouldering, ivy-grown wall, and beyond it he knew was a smooth-shaven lawn, a spreading cypress, a wealth of roses, and the prettiest parsonage within four counties. He had learned the trick of the gate, and had opened it often enough, yet he paused for a moment outside. Although he had walked his three miles pretty fast, he had been perfectly cool hitherto, but now he drew his handkerchief across his face, while with white parched lips and trembling fingers he turned the handle of the wicket and passed through.

CHAPTER III

NORAH

THE lawn, the cedar, the roses, there they were exactly as he had pictured them to himself last night in his dreams, that morning when he awoke, the whole forenoon in the dreary study, through those eternal equations. Nothing was wanting, not even the low chair, the slender work-table, nor the presence that made a paradise of it all.

She was sitting in a white dress beneath the drooping lime-tree that gleamed and quivered in the sunbeams, alive with its hum of insects, heavy in its wealth of summer fragrance, and raining its shower of blossoms with every breath that whispered through its leaves. For many a year after, perhaps his whole life long, he never forgot her as she sat before him then; never forgot the gold on her rich chestnut hair, the light in her deep fond eyes, nor the tremble of happiness in her voice, while she exclaimed, "Gerard! And again to-day! How did you manage to come over? It is so late, I had almost given you up!"

She had half-risen, as if her impulse was to rush towards him, but sat down again, and resumed her work with tolerable composure, though parted lips and flushing cheek betrayed only too clearly how welcome was this intrusion on her solitude.

He was little more than nineteen, and he loved her very dearly. He could find nothing better to say than this: "I only wanted to bring you some music. The others are engaged, and I had really nothing else to do. How is Mr. Welby?"

"Papa was quite well," she answered demurely enough, "and very busy as usual at this hour, in his own den. Should she let him know,"—and there was a gleam of mirth in her eye, a suspicion of malice in her tone, "should she run and tell him Mr. Ainslie was here?"

"By no means," answered Gerard, needlessly alarmed at such a suggestion; "I would not disturb him on any

consideration. And, Norah!—you said I might call you Norah at the Archery Meeting."

"Did I?" replied the young lady, looking exceedingly pretty and provoking; "I can't have meant it if I did."

"Oh, Norah!" he interposed reproachfully, "you don't mean to say you've forgotten!"

"I haven't forgotten that you were extremely cross, and ate no luncheon, and behaved very badly," she answered, laughing. "Never mind, Gerard, we made friends coming home, didn't we? And if I said you might, I suppose you must. Now you look all right again, so don't be a rude boy, but tell me honestly if you walked all this way in the sun only because you had nothing better to do?"

His eyes glistened. "You know why I come here," he said. "You know why I would walk a thousand miles barefoot to see you for five minutes. Now I shall be contented all to-day and to-morrow, and then next morning I shall begin to get restless and anxious, and if I can, I shall come here again."

"You dear fidget!" she answered, with a bright smile. "I know I can believe you, and it makes me very happy. Now hold these silks while I wind them; and after that, if you do it well, I'll give you some tea; and then you shall see papa, who is really very fond of you, before you go back."

So the two sat down—in fairyland—under the lime-tree, to wind silks—a process requiring little physical exertion, and no great effort of mind. It seemed to engross their whole energies nevertheless, and to involve a good deal of conversation, carried on in a very low tone. I can guess almost all they said, but should not repeat such arrant nonsense, even had I overheard every syllable. It was only that old story, I suppose, the oldest of all, but to which people never get tired of listening; and the sameness of which in every language, and under all circumstances, is as remarkable as its utter want of argument, continuity, or common sense.

Gerard Ainslie and Miss Welby had now known each other for about six months, a sufficiently long period to allow of very destructive campaigns both in love and war. They had fallen in love, as people call it, very soon after their first introduction; that is to say, they had thought about each other a good deal, met often enough to keep up a vivid recollection of mutual sayings and doings, yet with sufficient uncertainty to create constant excitement, none the less keen for frequent disappointments; and, in short, had gone through the usual probation by which that accident of an accident,

an unwise attachment between two individuals, becomes strengthened in exact proportion to its hopelessness, its inconvenience, and the undoubted absurdity that it should exist at all.

People said Mr. Welby encouraged it; whereas poor Mr. Welby, who would have esteemed the prince in a fairy-tale not half good enough for his daughter, was simply pleased to think that she should have companions of her own age, male or female, who could bring a brighter lustre to her eye, a softer bloom to her cheek. It never occurred to him for a moment that his Norah, his own peculiar pride and pet and constant companion since he lost her mother at four years old, should dream of caring for anybody but himself, at least for many a long day to come. If he did contemplate such a possibility, it was with a vague, misty idea that in some ten years or so, when he was ready to drop into his grave, some great nobleman would lay a heart, and a coronet to match, at his child's feet, and under the circumstances such an arrangement would be exceedingly suitable for all concerned. But that Norah—his Norah—should allow her affections to be entangled by young Gerard Ainslie, though a prime favourite of his own, why I do not believe such a contingency could have been placed before him in any light that could have caused him to admit the remotest chance of its existence.

Nevertheless, while Mr. Welby was making bad English of excellent Greek, under the impression that he was rendering the exact meaning of Euripides for the benefit of unlearned men, his daughter and her young adorer were enacting the old comedy, tragedy, farce, or pantomime—for it partakes of the nature of all these entertainments—on their own little stage, with scenery, dresses, and decorations to correspond. Ah! we talk of eloquence, expression, fine writing forsooth! and the trick of word-painting, as very a trick as any other turn of the handicraftsman's trade: but who ever read in a whole page of print one half the poetry condensed into two lines of a woman's manuscript?—ungrammatical, if you please, ill expressed, and with long tails to the letters, yet breathing in every syllable that sentiment of ideality which has made the whole ornamental literature of the world. After all, the head only reproduces what the heart creates; and so we give the mocking-bird credit when he imitates the loving murmurs of the dove.

If oratory should be judged by its effect, then must Norah Welby and Gerard Ainslie have been speakers of the

highest calibre. To be sure, they had already practised in a good many rehearsals, and ought to have been pretty well up in their parts.

The simultaneous start with which they increased their distance by at least a fathom, on hearing the door-bell jingling all over the house, would have ensured a round of applause from any audience in Europe.

"How provoking!" exclaimed the girl; "and people so seldom come here on a Tuesday. Perhaps, after all, it's only somebody for papa."

Gerard said nothing, but his colour deepened, and a frown of very obvious annoyance lowered on his brow. It did not clear the more to observe an open carriage, with a pair of good-looking horses, driven round to the stables. As paint and varnish glistened in the sunshine through the laurels, Miss Welby drew a long sigh of relief.

"It might have been worse," she said; "it might have been the Warings, all of them, with their aunt, or that dreadful Lady Baker, or Mrs. Brown; but it's only Mr. Vandeleur, and he won't stay long. Besides, he's always pleasant and good-natured, and never says the wrong thing. We won't have tea, though, till he's gone."

"It seems to me, Norah," answered her visitor, "that you rather like Mr. Vandeleur."

"Like him! I should think I did!" protested the young lady; "but you needn't look so fierce about it, Master Jerry. I like him because papa does; he's always in better spirits after a visit from Mr. Vandeleur. Besides, he's immensely clever, you know, and well-read, and all that. Papa says he might be in the Government if he chose to go into Parliament. Not that I care about clever people myself; I think it's much nicer to be like you, Jerry, you stupid boy! I don't think you'll ever pass your examination—and so much the better, for then you won't have to go away, and leave us all, and—and forget us."

"Forget you!" replied Gerard, decreasing by one half the distance he had taken up from his companion. What more he might have said was cut short by the appearance of a gentleman whose step had been unheard on the thick velvet turf, and who now came forward to greet his hostess, with an admirable mixture of the deference due to a young lady, and the cordiality permitted from an old friend.

"I came through the garden on purpose to say how d'ye do," he observed, with marked politeness, "but my visit is really to your father. I hope he is not too busy to see me

for half an hour. In fact, I believe he expected me either to-day or to-morrow." Then turning to Gerard, he shook him warmly by the hand, and congratulated him on the score he had made a few days before in a cricket-match.

Norah was right. Mr. Vandeleur was not a man to say the wrong thing, even under the most unfavourable circumstances. Those who knew him best affirmed that he was not to be hurried, nor taken aback, nor found at a loss. He would have been exceedingly popular, but that never for more than a few seconds could he look anybody in the face. His eyes shifted uneasily from Gerard's even now. The latter did not like him, and though he answered civilly, was too young to conceal his aversion; but Vandeleur, with all the advantage of position, manner, and experience, still more of the man over the boy, and, above all, of the careless admirer over the devoted slave, felt too safe not to be in good humour, and put in even for Gerard's approval by the tact with which he veiled his consciousness of intrusion, while he announced his intention to withdraw.

"I see you have both more work to do," he observed, gaily pointing to a skein of silk that still hung over the back of Norah's chair, for in truth the operation had been going on very slowly, "and I have, as usual, a thousand things to attend to between this and dinner. Miss Welby, do you think I might venture to invade your father at once in his study? If you are not gone in half an hour, Ainslie, I can give you a lift most of the way back. I should like you to get your hand on those chestnuts of mine. The white-legged one is the only perfect phaeton-horse I ever had in my life. I will come and make my bow to Miss Welby before I start."

"Isn't he nice?" exclaimed Norah, as the visitor disappeared under the low ivy-grown porch of the Parsonage. "He always seems to do exactly what you want without finding you out. And if you're tired or stupid, or don't like to talk, he'll neither bore you himself nor let other people worry you. Isn't he nice, I say? Master Jerry, why can't you answer? Don't you know that I will insist on your liking everybody I like?"

"I cannot like Mr. Vandeleur," answered Gerard doggedly, for not even the compliment implied in asking his opinion of the phaeton-horses—a compliment generally so acceptable at nineteen—had overcome his distaste to this gentleman. "I never did like him, and I never shall like him. And I think I hate him all the more, Norah, because—because"—

"Because what?" asked Miss Norah pettishly; "because *I* like him!"

"Because I think he likes you," answered Gerard, with a very red face; adding somewhat injudiciously, "It's absurd, it's ridiculous! An old man like that!"

"He's not so very old," observed the young lady maliciously; "and he's tolerably good-looking still."

"He's a widower, at anyrate," urged Gerard; "and they say he regularly killed his first wife."

"So did Bluebeard," replied wicked Miss Norah; "and look how people made up to him afterwards! Do you know, I don't see why Mr. Vandeleur shouldn't settle down into a very good husband for anybody."

Gerard had been red before: he turned pale now.

"Do you really mean that?" he asked in tones rather lower and more distinct than common.

"For anybody of his own age, of course," answered the provoking girl. "Not for a *young* lady, you know. Why, he must be very nearly as old as papa. I wish he'd come to say good-bye all the same, though he must take you with him. Poor boy! you'll never get back in time, and you'll be so hot if you have to run all the way."

Even while she spoke, a servant came out of the Parsonage with a message. It was to give "Mr. Vandeleur's compliments, and one of his horses had lost a shoe. He feared to make Mr. Ainslie too late, if he waited till it was put on."

"And you've never had your tea after all!" exclaimed Norah, about to recall the servant and order that beverage forthwith.

But Ainslie did not want any tea, and could not stay for it if he had wanted some. Even his light foot could hardly be expected to do the three miles much under twenty-five minutes, and he must be off at once. He hated going, and she hated parting with him. Probably they told each other so, for the servant was already out of hearing, and his back was turned.

We may follow the servant's example. We have no wish to be spies on the leave-taking of two young lovers at nineteen.

CHAPTER IV

MR. VANDELEUR

I HAVE not the slightest doubt the chestnut horse's shoe was off when he arrived, and that his owner was perfectly aware of the loss while so politely offering Gerard Ainslie a lift back in his carriage, but Mr. Vandeleur was a gentleman untroubled by scruples, either in small things or great. His principle, if he had any, was never to practise insincerity unless it was necessary, or at least extremely convenient, except where women were concerned; in such cases he considered deceit not only essential, but praiseworthy. As a young man, Vandeleur had been a profligate, when open profligacy was more the fashion than at present; while good looks, a good constitution, and a good fortune helped him to play his part successfully enough on the stage of life, in London or Paris, as the pleasant, popular good-for-nothing, who in spite of his extravagance was never out-at-elbows, in spite of his excesses was never out of spirits or out of humour. With a comely exterior, a healthy digestion, and a balance at his banker's, a man requires but few sterling qualities to make his way in a society that troubles itself very little about its neighbours so long as they render themselves agreeable, in a world that while not entirely adverse to being shocked, is chiefly intolerant of being bored.

Some of those who ministered to his pleasures might indeed have told strange stories about Vandeleur, and one violent scene in Paris was only hushed up by the tact of an exalted foreign friend and the complicity of a *sergent de ville*; but such trifling matters were below the surface, and in no way affected his popularity, particularly amongst the ladies, with whom a little mystery goes a long way, and into whose good graces the best initiative step is to awaken a curiosity, that seldom fails to chafe itself into interest if left for a time ungratified. It can only have been some morbid desire to learn more of him at all risks, that tempted the daughter of a ducal house to trust her life's happiness in so frail a bark as

that of Vandeleur. "Lady Margaret must be a bold girl!" was the general opinion expressed at White's, Boodle's, and Arthur's, in the boudoirs of Belgravia, and the dining-rooms of Mayfair, when her marriage was announced, and it was observed that the bridegroom's intimate friends were those who showed most disapprobation of the alliance, and who chiefly commiserated the bride. Nevertheless, bold or blushing, Lady Margaret married him decorously, attended the wedding-breakfast afterwards, and eventually drove off in a very becoming lilac travelling-dress to spend the honeymoon at Oakover, her husband's old family place. But she never came back to London. For two years husband and wife disappeared entirely from the set in which they had hitherto lived, regretted loudly, missed but little, as is the way of the world. They travelled a good deal, they vegetated at their country place, but at home or abroad never seemed to be an hour apart.

Some people said she was jealous, frightfully jealous, and would not let him out of her sight; some that they were a most attached couple; some that Lady Margaret's health had grown very precarious, and she required constant attention. Her own family shook their heads and agreed, "Margaret was much altered since her marriage, and seemed so wrapped up in her husband that she had quite forgotten her own relations. As for him—Well, they didn't know what she had done to him, but he certainly used to be much pleasanter as a bachelor!"

Lady Margaret had no children, yet she lost her looks day by day. At the end of two years the blinds were down at Oakover, and its mistress was lying dead in the bedroom that had been decorated so beautifully to receive her as a bride. The sun rose and set more than once before Vandeleur could be persuaded to leave her body. A belated housemaid, creeping upstairs to bed, frightened out of her wits at anyrate by the bare idea of a death in the house, heard his laughter ringing wild and shrill in that desolate chamber at the end of the corridor. Long afterwards, in her next place, the poor girl would wake up in the night, terrified by the memory of that fearful mirth, which haunted even her dreams. On the day of Lady Margaret's funeral, however, the mourners were surprised to see how bravely her husband bore his loss. In a few weeks the same people declared themselves shocked to hear that Mr. Vandeleur went about much as usual; in a few months, were surprised to learn he had retired from the world and gone into a monastery.

The monastery turned out to be simply a yacht of considerable tonnage. For two years Vandeleur absented himself from England, and of that two years he either would not, or could not, give any account. When he returned, the ladies would have made him a second Lara, had he shown the least tendency to the mysterious and romantic; but he turned up one morning in Hyde Park as if nothing had happened, paid his penny for a chair, lit his cigar, took his hat off to the smartest ladies with his old manner, went to the opera, and in twenty-four hours was as thoroughly re-established in London as if he had never married and never left it.

He was still rather good-looking, but affected a style of dress and deportment belonging to a more advanced period of life than he had attained. His hair and whiskers were grizzled, indeed, and there were undoubted wrinkles about his keen restless eyes, as on his healthy, weather-browned cheek; yet none of the ladies voted him too old to marry; they even protested he was not too old to dance; and I believe that at no period of his life would Vandeleur have had a better chance of winning a nice wife than in the first season after his return from his mysterious disappearance.

He did not seem the least inclined to take advantage of his luck. While at Oakover, indeed, he busied himself to a certain extent with a country gentleman's duties and amusements — attended magistrates' meetings at rare intervals, asked a houseful of neighbours to shoot, dine, and sleep, two or three times during the winter; was present at one archery meeting in October, and expressed an intention he did not fulfil, of going to the County Ball; but in London he appeared to relapse insensibly into his bachelor ways and bachelor life, so that the Vandeleur of forty was, I fear, little more useful or respectable a member of society than the Vandeleur of twenty-five.

A few years of such a life, and the proprietor of Oakover seemed to have settled down into a regular groove of refined self-indulgence. The tongue of scandal wags so freely when it has once been set going, that no wonder it soon tires itself out, and a man who pays lavishly for his pleasures finds it a long time before they rise up in judgment against him. Even in a country neighbourhood it is possible to establish a prescriptive right for doing wrong; and while the domestic arrangements at Oakover itself were conducted with the utmost decorum and propriety, people soon ceased to trouble

themselves about its master's doings when out of his own house.

For an idle man Vandeleur was no mean scholar. The sixth form at Eton, and a good degree at Oxford, had not cured him of a taste for classic literature, and he certainly did derive a pleasure from his visits to Mr. Welby's parsonage, which had nothing to do with the bright eyes of the clergyman's daughter.

Host and guest had much in common. Welby himself, before he entered the Church—of which it is but fair to say he was a conscientious minister—had been familiar, so to speak, with the ranks of the Opposition. Even now he looked back to the brilliancy of that pleasant, wicked world, as the crew of Ulysses may have recalled the wild delights of their enchanted island. False they were, no doubt—lawless, injurious, debasing; yet tinged, they felt too keenly, with an unearthly gleam of joy from heaven or hell. They are thankful to have escaped, yet would they not forego the strange experience if they could.

Miss Welby was right when she said her father always seemed in better spirits after a visit from Mr. Vandeleur; perhaps that was why she received the latter so graciously when, emerging from the study, he crossed the lawn to take leave of her some twenty minutes after Gerard Ainslie's departure.

He ought to have been no bad judge, and he thought he had never seen a woman look so well. Happiness is a rare cosmetic; and though, as many a man had reason to admit, sorrow in after years refined, idealised, and gave a more elevated character to her beauty, I doubt if Norah was ever more captivating to Vandeleur than on that bright summer's afternoon under the lime-trees.

She was thinking of Gerard, as a woman thinks of her idol for the time. That period may be a lifetime, or it may last only for a year or two, or for a few months. I have even heard three weeks specified as its most convenient duration; but long or short, no doubt the worship is sincere and engrossing while it exists. The little flutter, the subdued agitation created by the presence of her lover, had vanished, but the feeling of intense happiness, the sense of complete dependence and repose, steeped her in an atmosphere of security and contentment that seemed to glorify her whole being, and to enhance even the physical superiority of her charms. She felt so thankful, so joyful, so capable of everything that was noble or good, so completely in charity with

all the world! No wonder she greeted her father's friend with a cordial manner and a bright smile.

"Your carriage has not come round yet, Mr. Vandeleur," she said, "and they will bring tea in five minutes. Papa generally comes out and has a cup with us here. You, at least, are not obliged to hurry away," she added rather wistfully, glancing at the chair which Gerard had lately occupied.

His eye followed hers. "I am glad I am too old for a private tutor," he answered, with a meaning smile. "That's a very nice boy, Miss Welby, that young Mr. Ainslie; and how sorry he seemed to go away."

She blushed. It was embarrassing to talk about Gerard, but still it was not unpleasant.

"We all like him very much," she said guardedly, meaning probably by "all," herself, her papa, and her bullfinch, which comprised the family.

"A nice gentleman-like boy," continued Mr. Vandeleur; "well-disposed, too, I can see. When I was his age, Miss Welby, I don't think I should have been so amenable to discipline under the same temptation. I fancy my tutor might have whistled for me, if I wanted to be late for dinner. Ah! we were wilder in my time, and most of us have turned out badly in consequence; but I like this lad, I assure you, very much. None the less that he seems so devoted to you. Have you known him long?"

Luckily the tea had just arrived, and Norah could bend her blushing face over the cups. Had she known Gerard long? Well, it seemed so; and yet the time had passed only too quickly. She had known him scarcely six months. Was that a long or a short acquaintance in which to have become so fond of him?

With faltering voice she replied, "Yes—no—not very long — ever since last winter, when he came to Mr. Archer's?"

"Who is he? and what is he?" continued Vandeleur, sipping his tea calmly. "Do they mean him for a soldier? Will my friend Archer make anything of him? Don't you pity poor Archer, Miss Welby? A scholar, a gentleman, a fellow who has seen some service, and might have distinguished himself if he had stuck to the Army. And now he is condemned to spend seven hours a day in licking cubs into shape for inspection by the Horse Guards."

"There are no cubs there this year," she answered, with some spirit. "Mr. Burton and Mr. Egremont, and the rest,

are very gentleman-like, pleasant young men, and just as clever as anybody else!"

"That is not saying much," he replied, with perfect good humour; "but when I talk of cubs I declare to you I don't mean your friend and mine, Mr. Ainslie. I tell you I have taken a great fancy to the boy, and would do him a turn if I could. I suppose he would like to get his commission at once?"

Even at nineteen she was yet woman enough to have studied his future welfare; and his getting his commission was the point to which she had so often looked forward with dismay as the termination of their happiness—it might be, something whispered to her ominously, even of their friendship. Nevertheless, she knew it would be for his advantage to enter the Army at once. She knew he was wasting his time here, in nothing perhaps more than in his oft-repeated visits to herself. Her heart sank when she thought of the lawn, and the cedar, and the lime-trees, without those visits to look back on, and look forward to, but she answered bravely, though her face turned very pale—

"Certainly! It would be of great importance to Mr. Ainslie, I believe; and I am sure he would be grateful to anybody who could help him to it."

She would have added, "And so should I," but a sensation as if she were choking stopped her short.

"If you are interested about him, that is enough," replied Vandeleur. "I will try what can be done, and small as is my interest, it ought to be sufficient to carry out so very commonplace a job as this. In the meantime what a hot walk the poor boy will have! I wish he could have waited. I would have driven him to Archer's door. It's a good thing to be young, Miss Welby, but no doubt there are certain disadvantages connected with a prosperity that is still *to come*. In ten years that young gentleman will be a rising man, I venture to predict. In twenty a successful one, with a position and a name in the world. Twenty years! It's a long time, isn't it? I shall be in my grave, and you—why even you will have left off being a young lady then."

She was thinking the same herself. Would it really be twenty years before poor Gerard could reach the lowest round of that ladder on which she longed to see him? Mr. Vandeleur had great experience, he must know best, he was a thorough man of the world. What an unfair world it was. Poor Gerard!

She sighed, and raising her eyes to her companion's face,

who instantly looked away, was conscious he had read her thoughts: this added to her discomposure, and for the moment she felt as if she could cry. Vandeleur knew every turn of the game he was playing, and saw that for the present he had better enact any part than that of confidant. Later, perhaps, when Gerard was gone, and the blank required filling up, it might be judicious to assume that, or any other character, which would give him access to her society; but at the present stage disinterested friendship was obviously the card to play, and he produced it without hesitation.

"Then that is settled," he said gaily. "I'll do what I can, and if I don't succeed you may be sure it's not for want of goodwill to you and yours. I'm an old friend, you know, Miss Welby—if not of your own, at least of your father's; and believe me, it would be a great pleasure to serve you in anything. Anything!—a caprice, a fancy, what you will. Black or white, right or wrong, easy or difficult—or impossible. That's plain speaking, isn't it? I don't do things by halves! And now I must really be off; those horses of mine have pawed a regular pit in your gravel-walk, and half a dozen country neighbours are waiting dinner for me at this moment, I do believe. Good-bye, Miss Welby; keep your spirits up, and let me come and see you again when I've some good news to tell."

Still talking, he hurried away, and drove off at a gallop, waving his whip cheerfully above the laurels as he passed within sight of the lawn. Norah thought she had never liked him so much as when the grating of his wheels died out in the stillness of the summer evening, and she was left alone with her own thoughts.

"stopped his carriage"

CHAPTER V

THE MAID OF THE MILL

MR. VANDELEUR always drove fast. He liked to know that the poor countryman breaking stones on the road, or laying the fence by its side, looked after him as he flashed by, with stolid admiration on his dull face, and muttered, "Ah! there goes Squire Vandeleur, surelie." On the present occasion his pace was even better than common, and the chestnuts laid themselves down to their work in a form that showed the two hundred guineas a-piece he had paid for them was not a shilling too much. He pulled them back on their haunches, however, at a turn in the road, with a sudden energy that jerked his groom's chin against the rail of the driving-seat, and stopped his carriage within three feet of a showily dressed young woman, who was gathering wild flowers off the hedge with a transparent affectation of unconsciousness that she was observed.

"Why, Fanny," said he, leaning out of the carriage to look under her bonnet,—"Fanny Draper, I thought you were in London, or Paris, at least;—or gone to the devil before your time," he added, in an undertone, between his teeth.

The lady thus accosted put her hand to her side with a faint catching of the breath, as of one in weak health, whose nerves are unequal to a shock. She glanced up at him from under her eyelashes roguishly enough, however, while she replied—

"My! If it isn't Squire Vandeleur! I'm sure I never thought as you'd be the first person to meet me at my home-coming, and that's the truth." Here she dropped a saucy little curtsey. "I hope you've kept your health, sir, since I see you last!"

"Much you care for that, you little devil!" replied Vandeleur, with a familiar laugh. "My health is pretty good for an old one, and you look as handsome and as wicked as you ever did. So we needn't pay each other any more unmeaning compliments Here! I've got something to say

to you. Jump up, and I'll give you a lift home to the mill."

The girl's eyes sparkled, but she looked meaningly towards the groom at the horses' heads, and back in his master's face.

"Oh, never mind him!" exclaimed the latter, understanding the glance. "If my servants don't attend to their own business, at least they never trouble themselves about mine. Jump up, I tell you, and don't keep that off-horse fretting all night."

She still demurred, though with an obvious intention of yielding at last.

"Suppose we should meet any of the neighbours, Mr. Vandeleur, or some of the gentlefolks coming home from the archery. Why, whatever would they think of you and me?"

"Please yourself," he answered carelessly. "Only, it's a long two miles to the mill, and I suppose you don't want to wear those pretty little boots out faster than you can help. Come! that's a good girl. I thought you would. Sit tight now. Never mind your dress. I'll tuck it in under the apron. Let 'em alone, Tom! And off she goes again!"

While he spoke, he stretched out his hand and helped her into the front seat by his side, taking especial care of the gaudy muslin skirt she wore. One word of encouragement was enough to make his horses dash freely at their collars, the groom jumped into his place like a harlequin, and the phaeton was again bowling through the still summer evening at the rate of twelve miles an hour.

When a tolerably popular person has earned a reputation for eccentricity, there is no end to the strange things he may do without provoking the censure, or even the comments of his neighbours. Even had it not been the hour at which most of them were dressing for dinner, there was little likelihood that Vandeleur would meet any of his friends in the lonely road that skirted his property, ere it brought him to the confines of his park; but it is probable that even the most censorious, observing him driving a smartly dressed person of the other sex in a lower grade of society than his own, would have made no more disparaging remark than that "Vandeleur was such a queer fellow, you never knew exactly what he was at!" He drove on, therefore, in perfect confidence, conversing very earnestly with his companion, though in such low tones that Tom's sharp ears in the back seat could scarcely make out a syllable he said. She listened attentively enough; more so, perhaps, than he had any right

to expect, considering that her thoughts were distracted by the enviable situation in which she found herself,—driving in a real phaeton, by the side of a real gentleman, with a real servant in livery behind.

Fanny Draper had occupied from her youth a position little calculated to improve either her good conduct or her good sense. She had been a village beauty almost as long as she could remember—ever since the time when she first began to do up her back-hair with a comb. The boys who sang in the choir made love to her when she went to the Sunday school; the young farmers paid her devoted attention and quarrelled about her among themselves the first day she ever attended a merry-making. She might have married a master-bricklayer at eighteen; and by the time she went out to service, was as finished a coquette in her own way as if she had been a French marquise at the Court of Louis Quatorze.

Of course, to use the master-bricklayer's expression, such a "choice piece of goods" as the miller's daughter was above doing rough work, and the only situation she could think of taking was that of a lady's maid; equally of course, she did not keep her first place three months, but returned to her father's mill before the expiration of that period, with rings on her fingers, a large stock of new clothes, and a considerable accession of self-esteem. Also, it is needless to add, like all ladies' maids, under a solemn engagement to be married to a butler!

Poor old Draper didn't know exactly what to make of her. He had two sons doing well in his own business at the other end of England. He was a widower, Fanny was his only daughter, and the happiest day in the year to him was the one when she came home. Nevertheless, what with her watch, her rings, her white hands, her flowing dresses, and the number of followers she managed to collect about her even at the mill, the old man felt that she was too much for him, and that while she lived in it the house never looked like his own. He admired her very much. He loved her very dearly. He seldom contradicted her; but he always smoked an extra pipe the night she went away, and yet he dreaded the time when she should make a sensible marriage (perhaps with the butler), and be off his hands, as he expressed it, for good and all.

Ripley Mill was but a little way from Oakover. It is not to be supposed that so comely a young woman as the miller's daughter escaped Mr. Vandeleur's observation. She

took good care to throw herself in his way on every possible occasion, and the squire, as her father called him, treated her with that sort of good-humoured, condescending, offensive familiarity which men seem to forget is the worst possible compliment to any woman high or low. That Miss Draper's vanity ever led her to believe that she could captivate the squire is more than I will take upon me to assert, but no doubt it was flattered by the trifling attentions he sometimes paid her; and she had been heard to observe more than once amongst her intimates, that "the squire was quite the gentleman, and let alone his appearance, which was neither here nor there, his manners would always make him a prime favourite with the ladies," invariably adding that, "for her part, the squire knew his place, and she knew hers."

The pace at which Vandeleur drove soon brought them to a certain stile over which Miss Fanny had leant many a time in prolonged interviews with different rustic lovers, and which was removed but by one narrow orchard from her father's mill. Short as was the time, however, the driver seemed to have made the most of it, for his companion's face looked flushed and agitated when she got down. A perceptible shade of disappointment and even vexation clouded her brow, while the voice in which she bade him good-evening betrayed a certain amount of pique and ill-humour bravely kept under. Vandeleur's tone, on the contrary, was confident and cheerful as usual.

"It's a bargain then," said he, releasing her hand, as she sprang on the foot-path from the top of the front wheel. "I can depend upon you, can't I, to do your best or worst; and your worst with that pretty face of yours would tackle a much more difficult job than this. Honour, Miss Fanny! If you'll keep your word, you know I'll keep mine."

"Honour, squire," replied she, with a forced smile that marred the comeliness of all the lower part of her face. "But you're in a desperate hurry! A week isn't much time, now, is it? to finish a young gentleman right off."

"Those bright eyes of yours finished an old gentleman right off in a day," answered Vandeleur, laughing. "Good-night, my dear, and stick to your bargain."

Before she was over the stile his phaeton had turned a corner in the lane, and was out of sight.

Miss Draper took her bonnet off, and dangled it by the strings while the cool evening air breathed on her forehead and lifted her jetty locks. She was a pretty girl, no doubt, of a style by no means uncommon in her class. Dark eyes,

high colour, irregular features, with a good deal of play in them, a large laughing mouth, and a capital set of teeth, made up a face that people turned round to look at in market-places, or on high-roads, and her figure, as she herself boasted, required "no making up, with as little dressing as most people's, provided only her things was good of their kind." Yes, she was a handsome girl, and though her vanity had received a considerable shock, she did not doubt it even now.

After a few seconds' thought, her irritation seemed to subside. Circumstances had for some years forced Miss Draper's mind to take a practical turn. Flattered vanity was a pleasing sensation, she admitted, but tangible advantage was *the* thing after all.

"Now, whatever can the squire be driving at?" soliloquised his late companion, as threading the apple-trees she came within hearing of the familiar mill. "There's something behind all this, and I'll be at the back of it as sure as my name's Fanny! He's a deep 'un, is the squire, but he's a gentleman, I will say that! Quite the gentleman, he is! Ten pounds down. Let me see, that will pay for the two bonnets, and as much as I ever *will* pay of Mrs. Markham's bill. And twenty more if it all comes off right, within a month. Twenty pounds is a good deal of money! Yes, I always did uphold as the squire were quite the gentleman."

She arrived simultaneously with this happy conclusion at the door of her paternal home, and the welcome of her father's professionally dusty embrace.

Vandeleur was not long in reaching Oakover, and commencing his toilet, which progressed rapidly, like everything else he did, without his appearing to hurry it. At a sufficiently advanced stage he rang for his valet. "Anybody come yet?" asked the host, tying a white neckcloth with the utmost precision.

"Sir Thomas Boulder, Colonel and Mrs. Waring, Lady Baker, Mrs. and Miss St. Denys, Major Blades, Captain Coverley, and Mr. Green," answered the well-drilled valet without faltering.

"Nobody else expected, is there?" was the next question, while his master pulled the bows to equal length.

"Dinner was ordered for ten, sir," answered his servant.

"Been here long?" asked Vandeleur, buttoning the watch-chain into his waistcoat.

"About three-quarters of an hour, sir," was the imperturbable reply.

"Very good. Then get dinner in five minutes!" and although nine hungry guests were waiting for him, Vandeleur employed that five minutes in writing a letter to a great nobleman, with whom he was on intimate terms.

While he ordered a man and horse to gallop off with it at once to the nearest post-town, in time for the night mail, he read the following lines over with a satisfied expression of countenance, and rather an evil smile:—

"My dear Lord,—You can do me a favour, and I know I have only to ask it. I want a commission for a young friend of mine, as soon as ever it can be got. I believe he is quite ready for examination, or whatever you call the farce these young ones have to enact nowadays. In *our* time people were not so particular about *anything*. Still, I think you and I do pretty much as we like, and can't complain. On a slip of paper I enclose the young one's name and address. The sooner, for his own sake, we get him out of England the better, —and where he goes afterwards nobody cares a curse! You understand.

"Don't forget I expect you early next month, and will make sure there is a pleasant party to meet you.—Ever yours, J. Vandeleur."

"Not a bad day's work altogether," muttered the writer, as he stuck a stamp on the envelope, and went down to dinner.

CHAPTER VI

GRINDING

IN pursuance of her bargain with Mr. Vandeleur, whatever it may have been, Fanny Draper attired herself in a very becoming dress after her one-o'clock dinner on the following day, and proceeded to take an accidental stroll in the direction of Mr. Archer's house, which was but a few hundred yards distant from the village of Ripley.

Disinclined either to make fresh conquests or to meet old admirers, both contingencies being equally inconvenient at present, she followed a narrow lane skirting the backs of certain cottages, which brought her opposite the gate of Mr. Archer's garden at the exact moment when Dandy Burton, having finished his studies for the day, put a cigar into his mouth, as a light and temperate substitute for luncheon, the Dandy—whose figure was remarkably symmetrical—being already afraid of losing his waist. Miss Draper, as she would have expressed herself, "took more than one good look at him before she played her first card"; for the hawk, though unhooded, so to speak, and flung aloft, had not yet made quite sure of her quarry, and, except as a question of wholesome practice, it would be a pity to waste much blandishment upon the wrong young gentleman. So she scanned him carefully before she pounced, approving much of what she saw.

Dandy Burton was tall, well made, and undoubtedly good-looking, with an air, extremely becoming when people are not yet twenty, of being over his real age. His face was very nearly handsome, but there was something wanting in its expression, and a woman's eye would have preferred many a plainer countenance which carried a more marked impress of the man within.

Even Fanny was conscious of this defect at a second glance. It made her part, she reflected, all the easier to play. So gathering some violets from the hedge-side, she tied them coquettishly into a posy, and then, dropping a curtsey, shot a killing glance at the Dandy, while she observed, demurely enough—

"One of Mr. Archer's young gentlemen, I believe? I'm sure I ask your pardon, sir, if you're not."

Dandy Burton, thus challenged, ranged up alongside.

"I am staying with Mr. Archer at present," said he, removing the cigar from his mouth and making a faint snatch at his round shooting-hat. "Did you want to speak to any of us? I beg your pardon—I mean, can I be of any service to you before Mr. Archer goes out?"

With all the *savoir-vivre* he used to boast of in the pupil-room, Mr. Burton was a little puzzled. She was good-looking, she was well got-up, yet something in his instincts told him she was not quite a lady after all.

"It's not Mr. Archer," she answered, with a becoming little blush and a laugh: "it's the young gentleman as father bade me leave a message for—father, down at Ripley Mill, you know, sir."

"Bad English. Talks of 'father' and calls me 'sir,'" thought the Dandy, his confidence returning at once.

"All right, my dear," he answered, replacing the cigar in his mouth, and crossing the road to her side; "I know Ripley Mill well enough, and I know 'father,' as you call him, meaning, I suppose, my friend Mr. Draper; but I did not know he'd got such a little duck of a daughter. I wish I'd found it out, though, six months ago — I do, upon my honour!"

"Well, I'm sure!" replied Miss Fanny, in no way taken aback by the familiar tone of admiration, to which she was well accustomed. "You gentlemen are so given to compliments, there's no believing a word you say. I should like to hear, now, what good it would have done you if you had known as I was down at the mill six months ago."

"I should have walked over there every day, on the chance of seeing your pretty face!" answered the Dandy, rising, as he flattered himself, to the occasion.

"You wouldn't have found *me*," she laughed; "I've been in London since then. I only came home for good yesterday evening."

"Then I shall spend all my spare time at the mill now,

till I go away," retorted Burton, rolling the wet end of his cigar with his best air.

"Are you going away so soon?" she said, looking rather anxiously into his face.

"Decidedly," thought the Dandy, "this is a case of love at first sight. It's deuced odd, too. I am not much used to their ways, and it's just possible she may be gammoning a fellow all the time. Never mind! two can play at that game, so here goes."

"Not unless you'll come with me," he exclaimed affectionately. "Since I've seen you, Miss Draper, for I suppose you are Miss Draper, I couldn't bear to leave you. Now, touching this message. Are you quite sure you have brought it all this way without spilling any of it?"

"I'm not one as isn't to be trusted," answered the lady meaningly, motioning him at the same time to walk a little farther down the lane, out of sight of Mr. Archer's top windows. "They say as women can't keep secrets—I wish somebody would try me. It's not in my nature to deceive. There, what a fool I am, to go talking on to a gentleman like you, and I never set eyes on you before."

"But you'll let me come and see you down at the mill?" said he; "it is but a step, you know, from here. I could easily be there every day about this time."

"And I should like to know what father would say!" interposed Miss Fanny, with a sudden access of propriety. "I ought to have been back with father now, and here I am, putting off my time talking to you, and—there, I declare, I'm quite ashamed. I don't even know your name. It's Mr. Ainslie, isn't it?"

Burton laughed.

"Why do you think it's Ainslie?"

"Because they told me as Mr. Ainslie was the only grown-up gentleman here," she answered, hazarding a supposition that could not fail to be favourably received, and flattering herself she was going on swimmingly.

The Dandy, however, did not see the advantage of being taken for his friend, and thought it right to undeceive his new flame without delay.

"My name's Burton," he said, rather conceitedly. "Ainslie's a shorter chap, with darker hair and eyes—altogether, not quite so—not quite so"—he hesitated, for, though vain, he was not a fool.

"Not quite so much of a lady's man, I daresay!" She finished his sentence for him with a laugh, to cover her own

vexation, for she felt she had been wasting time sadly. "I don't think you're one as is ever likely to be mistook for somebody else. I must wish you good-day, now, sir. It's more than time I was back. I couldn't stay another minute if it was ever so."

She was a little disappointed at his ready acquiescence.

"And your message?" he asked, lighting a fresh cigar.

"It was only father's duty," she answered. "I was to tell the young gentlemen they're welcome to a day's fishing above Ripley Lock to-morrow, if they like to come, and there ought to be some sport for 'em, says father, if the wind keeps southerly."

"We'll be there," answered the Dandy joyfully. "And I say, how about luncheon? You'll bring it us, won't you, from the mill?"

"For how many?" asked Miss Fanny; thinking perhaps it might not be a bad plan.

"Well, there's three of us!" answered the Dandy. "Dolly, and Ainslie, and me. Better bring enough for four, Miss Draper. It's not every day in the week I do such things. Besides, you'll sit down with us, you know, or we shan't be able to eat a morsel."

She tossed her head. "Indeed, you're very kind," she said. "Well, if you're all coming, I'll attend to it, and perhaps bring it you myself. No, sir, not a step farther. I couldn't think of walking through the village with you. What would Mr. Archer say? Thank you; I can take very good care of myself."

Thus parrying the Dandy's importunities, who, having nothing better to do, proposed a lounge down to the mill in her company, Miss Draper proceeded on her homeward journey, only turning round when she had gone a few steps, to comply with his entreaties that she would give him her lately gathered posy.

"You'll chuck us the violets, at least," said this young gentleman in a plaintive tone.

"Yes; I don't want the violets," she answered, not very graciously, and, whisking past the turn by the baker's, was soon out of sight.

Dandy Burton was so elated with this, his last conquest, that he did not even wait to finish his cigar, but throwing it away, returned hastily to the pupil-room, in order to catch his companions before they went out.

He was lucky enough to find them both still in their studies; Gerard Ainslie struggling hard with "unknown

quantities," and Dolly puzzling over the discovery of America, an era of history inseparable, in his own mind, from the destruction of the Spanish Armada. Burton had no scruple in disturbing them.

"Look there, you chaps!" said he, throwing Fanny Draper's violets on the study-table. "That's the way to do it! A fellow can't even smoke a quiet weed in these diggings, but he's pelted in again with flowers! Now, I don't mind laying odds neither of you can tell in three guesses where these came from."

"Don't bother!" answered Ainslie, looking up impatiently, and diving once more head-foremost into his algebra.

> "Some flowerets of Eden we still inherit,
> But the trail of the Dandy is over them all,"

quoted Dolly, shutting up his English history with a sigh of relief. "Why, they were given you by 'some village maiden who with dauntless breast' was determined on making you a greater fool, my beloved Dandy, than nature and Archer combined can accomplish—if such a feat were indeed possible. They can't let him alone, ochone! Every institution has its showman, you know, Jerry, and the Dandy is ours!"

Gerard did not think it worth while to answer; and Burton, on whose good-humoured self-conceit the arrows of chaff rained harmless, replied, "Wouldn't you like it yourself, Dolly? Never mind, my boy. Every chap must paddle his own canoe. We all have different gifts, you know."

"Very true," replied Dolly. "Dress and deportment are yours; light literature, I think, is mine; and," sinking his voice while he jerked his head towards Ainslie, "love and logarithms are his."

"Wake up, Jerry!" exclaimed Burton, "and answer this slanderous accusation. Of logarithms we acquit you at once, and surely you are not soft enough to be in love!"

Ainslie reddened. "Well," he said, keeping down his confusion, "I suppose a fellow may have 'a spoon' if he likes."

"A spoon!" exclaimed Dolly. "A regular soup-ladle! He's got all the symptoms—premonitory, sympathetic, and confirmed.

> There is even a space for the ghost of her face in this narrow pupil-room,
> And Archer is blind, and the Dandy's a fool, and Jerry has met with his doom."

"What nonsense you talk!" retorted Ainslie angrily.

"At all events, I don't pick a handful of violets to flash them down on the study-table, and swear they were given me by a duchess five minutes ago. Hang it! mine should be a better swagger than that. I'd have roses or pinks, or a bunch of hot-house flowers, when I was about it."

> "A primrose on the river's brim,
> A yellow primrose is to him,
> And in he goes to sink or swim,"

observed Dolly. "One flower is as good as another, if it's offered by the right party. Now I know where Dandy got these. They were given him by the cook. She picks them for the salad, and puts them in with what she calls garnishing —slugs, egg-shell, and bits of gravel."

"You know nothing about it, Dolly!" exclaimed Ainslie. "This isn't a salad-day. No; it's a keepsake from Mother Markham,—milliner and *modiste*. She's repaired Dandy's stays ever so often since he came."

"You're wrong, both of you," said the imperturbable Dandy. "They were given me by Miss Draper—Miss Fanny Draper of Ripley Mill—now then! A young lady neither of you have ever seen; and a deuced pretty girl too. What's more, she asked if my name wasn't Ainslie?"

Again Gerard blushed, and this time without cause.

"A most improbable story," remarked Dolly. "Ainslie's engaged. If she'd said Egremont, I could have believed it. This requires confirmation."

"I can prove it fast enough," answered Burton. "Old 'Grits' wants us all to go down and fish at the Upper Lock to-morrow. It won't be bad fun. I vote we go, if Nobs will stand it. He must let us out at twelve o'clock."

"You'd better ask him, Dolly," said Gerard. "Here he comes!"

While the latter spoke, Mr. Archer entered the pupil-room with a listless air, and rather a weary step. Truth to tell, he was a little tired of the ever-recurring round which in the slang of to-day is not inappropriately termed a "grind." It paid him well, as he often said to himself, or it would be unbearable. Like the treadmill, or any such penal labour, it was hard work with no visible result. One pupil after another was indeed turned out, just able to squeeze through his examination, as a chair or a table is finished off to order by a carpenter; but that result attained, the master's duty was done by his disciple, and he had no further interest in the latter's progress or subsequent career. Slow and quick,

stupid and clever, all had to be brought up to exactly the same standard,—the former required more time and pains than the latter, that was the whole difference. One can scarcely conceive a more uninteresting phase of tutorship.

Archer had made an improvident marriage and a very happy one; had sold out of the Army in consequence, and had been glad to augment his slender income by fitting young men for the profession he had left. But his wife died early, and with her the stimulus to exertion was gone. He had no children, and few friends. Altogether it was weary work.

If the necessary amount of study could be got through in the week, a holiday was even a greater relief to tutor than pupils; and with a stipulation to that effect, he willingly granted Dolly's request that they should all start on their fishing excursion next day at twelve o'clock.

CHAPTER VII

A CAT'S-PAW

OLD "Grits," as his familiars called that very respectable miller, Mr. Draper, liked to have his breakfast early —really early; meaning thereby somewhere about sunrise. This entailed getting up in the dark on such of his household as prepared that meal, and Miss Fanny entertained the greatest objection to getting up in the dark. Consequently, as they breakfasted together—for on this the miller insisted while she stayed with him—both father and daughter were put out from their usual habits. The hour was too early for her, too late for him. He was hungry and snappish, she was hurried and cross. Whatever differences of opinion they entertained were more freely discussed, and more stoutly upheld at this, than at any other hour of the twenty-four.

It is a great thing to begin the day in good-humour; and that woman is wise, be she mother, wife, or daughter, who brings a smiling face down to breakfast ere the toast becomes sodden and the tea cold; who if she has disagreeable intelligence to communicate, grievances to detail, or complaints to make, puts them off till the things have been taken away, and an evil can be confronted in that spirit of goodwill and good-humour which robs it of half its force. Put man, woman, or child, or even a dumb animal, wrong the first thing in the morning, and the equanimity thus lost is seldom restored till late in the afternoon. Grits and Fanny both knew this well by experience, yet they had their say out just the same.

"Now, Fan!" grunted the miller, walking heavily into their little parlour, with a cloud of yesterday's flour rising from his clothes. "Look alive, girl! Come—bustle, bustle! It's gone six o'clock."

"Why, father, how you keep on worriting!" replied a voice from an inner chamber, constrained and indistinct, as of one who is fastening her stays, with hair-pins in her mouth.

"Worriting, indeed!" retorted Mr. Draper. "It's been broad daylight for more than an hour. I should like to know

how a man is to get his work done if his breakfast has to be put back till nigh dinner-time. These may be quality manners, lass; but blow me if they suits us down here at Ripley!"

"Blow your tea, father—that's what you've got to blow," replied Miss Fanny, who had now emerged from her tiring-room only half-dressed, pouring him out a cup so hot that it was transferred, to be operated on as she suggested, into the saucer. "I do believe now, if it wasn't for me coming here to stop with you at odd times, you'd get your breakfast so early as it would interfere with your supper over-night!"

The miller was busy with thick bread-and-butter. A growl was his only reply. Miss Fanny looked out of the window thoughtfully, drank a little tea, shot a doubtful glance at her papa, and hazarded the following harmless question—

"It's a dull morning, father. Do you think it will hold up—you that knows the weather so well at Ripley?"

It pleased him to be esteemed wise on such matters, and the hot tea had put him in a better humour.

"Hold up, lass?" he answered cheerfully; "why shouldn't it hold up? Even with a south wind, these here grey mornings doesn't often turn to rain. You may put your best bonnet on to-day, Fan, never fear!"

"Then, if that's the case, I'll get the house-work over in good time; and I think I won't be back to dinner, father," said his daughter resolutely, as anticipating objection.

But for its coating of flour the miller's face would have darkened.

"Not back to dinner, Fan! And why not? Where may you be going, lass, if I may make so bold as ask?"

She hesitated a moment, and then observed very demurely—"I took your message to Mr. Archer's yesterday, and the young gentlemen's coming down to fish, as you kindly invited of 'em"—

"I know—I know," said he. "Well, lass, and what then?"

"They're to be at water-side by twelve o'clock, and I'll engage they'll keep on till sundown. Poor little chaps! They'll be wanting their dinners, and I thought I'd best step out and take 'em some."

"Poor little chaps!" repeated the miller. "Why, one of em's six feet high, and t'other's nigh twenty years old; and Mr. Egremont—that's him as comes down by times for a smoke here—well, he'll pull down as heavy a weight as I can; and I daresay, for his years, he's nigh as sensible. They're grown-up young gentlemen, Fan, every man of 'em."

"They'll want their dinners all the same," answered Fan.

"And they'll want you to take 'em their dinners, I daresay; and want must be their master!" replied the miller. "I don't like it, Fan, I tell 'ee—I don't like it. What call have you to go more nor a mile up water-side after three young sparks like them? I may be behind the times, Fan—I daresay as I am; but it can't be right. I don't like it, I tell 'ee, lass, and I won't have it!"

"I'm not a child, father," answered the girl in perfect good-humour. "I should think I can take care of myself in uglier places than Ripley Lock; and I was going on to see the housekeeper at Oakover, whether or no. However, if you think well, I'll send Jane with the basket; only, she's wanted in the house, let alone that she's young and giddy; and if I was you, father, I'd sooner trust me nor her."

"I can get serving-lasses by the score," answered old Draper very gruffly, because a tear was twinkling in the corner of his eye, "but I have only one daughter. I've been a kind father to you, Fan, ever since you and me used to watch the big wheel together when you was too little to go up the mill-steps. Don't ye come a-flying in my face because you've growed up into a fine likely young woman—don't ye now!"

She was touched; she couldn't help it. She went round the table, and put her hand on the old man's shoulder. For the moment she was willing to be a dutiful and affectionate child.

"You *have* been a kind old daddy," she said, turning his dusty face up to kiss it; "and I wouldn't vex you for that kettleful of gold. But you won't mind my stepping across to Oakover—now, will you, father? And I'll be sure to come back and give you your tea."

She knew exactly how to manage him.

"You're a good lass, I do believe," said he, rising from the table, "and a sensible one too; maybe, more nor I think for. Well, there'll be no harm in your taking a basket of prog, and leaving it at the Lock for them young chaps. But don't ye go a-fishin' along of 'em, there's a good lass! Folk *will* talk, my dear. Why, they'll hardly let me alone when I give Widow Bolt a lift home from market in the cart. Now, hand us a light for the pipe, Fan. I've said my say, so I'm off to my work, and I'll leave you to yours."

But Mr. Draper shook his head, nevertheless, while he walked round by the mill-sluice, smoking thoughtfully.

"She's wilful," he muttered—"wilful; and so was her

mother. Most on 'em's wilful, as I see. I'm thankful the boys is doing so well. They're good sons to me, they are. And yet—and yet I'd sooner both on 'em was sold up—I'd sooner see the river run dry, and the mill stop work—I'd sooner lose the close, and the meadow, and the house, and the stock—than that anything should go wrong with little Fan!"

Little Fan in the meantime, having gained her point, was in high good-humour. She sang merrily over what trifling work she chose to do about the house, abstaining from harsh words to Jane, who whenever she had a spare moment seemed to be peeling potatoes. She packed a basket with eatables, and filled a bottle with wine, for the anglers. Then she attired herself in a very becoming dress, put on a pair of well-fitting gloves, not quite new, just like a real lady's, she told herself, and crowned the whole with a killing little bonnet. Anybody meeting Miss Draper as she sauntered leisurely along the river-side with her basket in her hand would have taken her for the rector's young wife, or the squire's daughter at the least.

Even the anglers were something dazzled by this brilliant apparition. Burton, proud of his aquaintance made the day before, felt yet a little abashed by so fascinating an exterior. Ainslie scanned her attentively, but this, I imagine, chiefly because her bonnet reminded him of Norah's; while Dolly, who was getting very hungry, took off his hat with a polite bow, observing in a low voice, for the benefit of his companions—

> "It was the miller's daughter,
> And she stoppeth one of three,
> On the banks of Allan-water—
> How I wish that it was me!"

Miss Draper's deportment in presence of three strange young gentlemen was a model of propriety and good taste. She simply vouchsafed a curtsey, to be divided amongst them; offered her father's good wishes for their sport; and proceeded to unpack her basket without delay. "For," said she, "I have no time to spare. I am going a little farther up-stream on an errand, and will call for the basket as I come back." Nevertheless, though her eyes seemed fastened on her occupation, she had scanned each of them from top to toe in two minutes, and learned the precise nature of the ground on which she was about to manœuvre.

Burton's name she had already learnt. One glance at Dolly Egremont's jolly face satisfied her that with him she could

have no concern. It must be the slim, well-made lad with the dark eyes and pleasant smile, whom she had engaged to subjugate. No disagreeable duty neither, thought Miss Fanny; so she set about it with a will.

Leaving her basket in charge of Dolly, who pledged himself with great earnestness for its safety, she walked leisurely up-stream, and was pleased to observe that the three anglers separated at once; his two companions choosing different sides of the river below the mill, while Gerard Ainslie followed the upward bend of the stream, not having yet put his rod together, nor unwound the casting-line from his hat. He was thinking but little of his fishing, this infatuated young man; certainly not the least of Miss Fanny Draper. No, the gleam on the water, the whisper of the sedges, the swallows dipping and wheeling at his feet, all the soft harmony of the landscape, all the tender beauty of the early summer,—what were these but the embodiment of his ideal? And his ideal, he fancied, was far away yonder, across the marshes, thinking, perhaps, at that very moment, of him! She was not across the marshes, as we shall presently see, but within half a mile of where he stood. Nevertheless, what would love be without illusion? And is not the illusion a necessary condition of the love? Look at a soap-bubble glowing in the richest tints of all the gems of earth and sea. Presently, behold, it bursts! What becomes of the tints? and where, oh! where is the bubble?

Gerard was roused from his dreams by the rustle of a feminine garment, and the sudden appearance of the miller's daughter lying in wait for him at the very first stile he had to cross. She knew better than to give a little half-suppressed start, as when she met Vandeleur, or to display any of the affectations indulged in by young women of her class; for, wherever she picked it up, Miss Draper had acquired considerable knowledge of masculine nature, and was well aware that while timidity and innocence are efficient weapons against the old, there is nothing like cool superiority to overawe and impose upon the young.

She took his rod out of his hand, as a matter of course, while he vaulted the stile, and observed quietly—"I saw you coming, Mr. Ainslie, and so I waited for you. I suppose as you're not much acquainted with our river; there's a pool, scarce twenty yards below the bridge, yonder, where you'll catch a basket of fish in ten minutes, if you've any luck."

She looked very pretty in the gleams of sunlight with her

heightened colour, and her black hair set off by the transparency she called a bonnet. Even to a man in love she was no despicable companion for an hour's fly-fishing; and Gerard thanked her heartily, asking her, if their ways lay together, to walk on with him, and point out the place. His smile was very winning, his voice low and pleasant, his manner to women soft and deferential—such a manner as comes amiss with neither high nor low: to a duchess, fascinating; to a dairy-maid, simply irresistible. Miss Draper stole a look at him from under her black eyelashes, and liked her job more and more.

"I'll come with you, and welcome," said she frankly. "The walk's nothing to me; I'm used to walking. I'm a country-bred girl, you know, Mr. Ainslie, though I've seen a deal of life since I left the mill."

"Then you don't live at the mill?" said Gerard absently, for that unlucky bonnet had taken his thoughts across the marshes again.

"I do when I'm at home," she answered, "but I'm not often at home. I've got my own bread to make, Mr. Ainslie, if I don't want to be a burden to father. And I don't neither. I'm not like a real lady, you know, that can sit with her hands before her, and do nothing. But you mustn't think the worse of me for that, must you?"

"Of course not!" he answered, as what else could he answer? wondering the while why this handsome black-eyed girl should thus have selected him from his companions for her confidences.

"I shouldn't be here now," she continued, "if it wasn't to see how father gets on. There's nothing but father to bring me back to such a dull place as Ripley. Yet, dull as it is, I can tell you, Mr. Ainslie, you must mind what you're at if you don't want to be talked about!"

"I suppose you and I would be talked about now," said he, laughing, "if we could be seen."

"*I* don't mind, if you don't!" she answered, looking full in his eyes. "Well, our walk's over now, at anyrate. There's the bridge, and here's the pool. I've seen my brothers stand on that stone, and pull 'em out a dozen in an hour!"

There was something of regret in her tone when she announced the termination of their walk that was sufficiently pleasant to his ear. He could not help looking gratified, and she saw it; so she added, "If you'll put your rod together, I'll sort your tackle the while. They've queer fancies, have

our fish, all the way from here to Ripley Lock; and they won't always take the same fly you see on the water. They're feeding now—look!"

So the two sat down together on a large stone under a willow, with the stream rippling at their feet, and the hungry trout leaping like raindrops, all across its surface—in the shadow of the opposite bank, in the pool by the water-lilies, under the middle arch of the bridge, everywhere just beyond the compass of a trout-rod and its usual length of line. Gerard's eye began to glisten, for he was a fisherman to the backbone. He had put his rod together, and was running the tackle through its top joint when his companion started and turned pale.

"Is that thunder?" said she. "Listen!"

"Thunder!" repeated the busy sportsman contemptuously. "Pooh! nonsense! It's only a carriage."

Miss Draper was really afraid of thunder, and felt much relieved.

"Haven't you a green drake?" she asked, hunting busily over his fly-book for that killing artifice.

He stooped low to help her, and one of the hooks in the casting-line round his hat caught in her pretty little bonnet. They were fairly tied together by the ears, a position that, without being at all unpleasant, was ridiculous in the extreme. She smiled sweetly in the comely face so close to her own, and both burst out laughing. At that moment a pony-carriage was driven rapidly across the bridge immediately over against them. Gerard's head was turned away, but its occupants must have had a full view of the situation, and an excellent opportunity of identifying the laughers. The lady who drove it immediately lashed her ponies into a gallop, bowing her head low over her hands as if in pain.

Gerard sprang to his feet.

"Did you see that carriage, Miss Draper?" he exclaimed hurriedly. "Had it a pair of cream-coloured ponies?"

"Cream-coloured ponies!" repeated Fanny innocently. "I believe they was. I think as it were Miss Welby, from Marston Rectory."

His violent start had broken the casting-line, and he was free. Like a deer, he sprang off in pursuit of the carriage, running at top speed for nearly a quarter of a mile. But the cream-coloured ponies were in good condition and well bred, —with a sore and jealous heart immediately behind them, which controlled, moreover, a serviceable driving-whip. He could never overtake them, but laid himself down panting

and exhausted on the grass by the roadside, after a two-mile chase.

When Gerard went back for his rod, Miss Draper was gone; but he had no heart for any more fishing the rest of that afternoon.

CHAPTER VIII

HOT CHESTNUTS

ASTOUNDED at her companion's unceremonious departure, the miller's daughter stood for a while motionless, her bright face darkening into an expression of vexation, not to say disgust. Half-immersed, the neglected trout-rod lay at her feet, paying its line out slowly to the gentle action of the stream. Something in the click of the reel perhaps aroused the thriftier instincts of her nature. She stooped to extricate rod and tackle with no unpractised hand, laid them on the bank ready for his return, and then sat down again to think. Till within the last few minutes Miss Draper had been well pleased. Not averse to flirting, she would have consented, no doubt, to take in hand any of Mr. Archer's young gentlemen; but her walk with Gerard Ainslie, though shorter, was also sweeter than she expected. The refinement of his tone, his gestures, his manner altogether, was extremely fascinating, because so unlike anything to which she was accustomed. "He's not so handsome as t'other," soliloquised Miss Draper, "for I make no count of the fat one" (thus putting Dolly ignominiously out of the race), "but his hair is as soft as a lady's and his eyes is like velvet. He's a nice chap, that! but whatever made him start away like mad after Miss Welby and her pony-carriage? I wonder whether he'll come back again? I wonder what odds it makes to me whether he comes back or no? Well, I've no call to be at the mill till tea-time. I'll just step on and gather a few violets at Ashbank. Perhaps the young man would like a posy to take with him when he goes home!"

She recollected, almost with shame, how willingly she had given away another posy of violets to his fellow-pupil so short a time ago.

Ashbank was a narrow belt of wood separating the meadow from the high-road. She had gathered many a wild flower under its tall trees, had listened to many a rustic

compliment, borne her full share of many a rustic flirtation, in its sheltering depths. For the first time in her life she wished it otherwise; she wished she had held her head a little higher, kept her clownish admirers at a more respectful distance. Such conquests, she now felt, were anything but conducive to self-respect. She rose from her seat impatiently, and it was with a heightened colour and quick irregular steps that she trod the winding foot-path leading to the wood.

She had never before thought the scenery about Ripley and its neighbourhood half so pretty. To-day there was a fresher verdure in the meadow, softer whispers in the woodland, a fairer promise in the quiet sky. She could not have analysed her feelings, was scarce conscious of them, far less could she have expressed their nature; yet she felt that for her, as for all of us, there are moments when—

> A livelier emerald twinkles in the grass,
> A purer sapphire melts into the sea;

and this was one of them.

There is a certain fire dreaded by burnt children, and often kindled by the tiniest spark, at which it is unspeakable comfort to warm the hands, but with the glow of which people never seem satisfied till they have burnt their fingers. Like other fires, it should be poked sparingly, is easily smothered with over-much fuel, and burns, I think, fiercest in the hardest weather. Also, though a good servant, it is a bad master; carefully to be watched, lest it spread to a conflagration; scarring deep where it scorches, to leave the sufferer marked and disfigured for a lifetime.

Of that fire the miller's daughter had been hitherto unconscious. She had always stood, as yet, on higher ground than those of the other sex, whatever their station, on whom she had thought it worth while to exercise her fascinations. It was capital fun then. It was all mirth, merry-making, rivalry, and gratified vanity. Was it good fun now? She had already asked herself that question, though she had scarcely spent half an hour in the society of her new acquaintance. Already she had answered. No! it was something better than fun, this—something deeper, sweeter, and far more dangerous. The first time a swimmer trusts to his newly acquired art he exults, no doubt, in the excitement of his situation, the development of his power; but want of confidence in himself is the sure symptom that proves to him he is out of his depth. So was it now with Fanny. She longed for a mirror in which to arrange her hair,

dishevelled by the south wind. She condemned the bonnet she had thought so killing an hour ago; she mistrusted her very muslin; she thought her gloves looked soiled and her boots untidy. She wondered whether he had detected freedom in her manner, want of education in her speech. She had often before wished she was a lady, but it was only that she might roll in a carriage, wear expensive dresses, and order about a quantity of servants. Now she felt as if she had overrated the value of all these things, that silks, and splendour, and liveries were not the sole accessories of good breeding; and yet she wanted to be a lady more than ever. Why? Because Mr. Ainslie was a gentleman.

Thus wishing, and dreaming, and repining, walking fast all the while, her colour was higher and her temper less equal than usual when she reached the shadows of Ashbank, and climbed the stile she had crossed so often on similar expeditions after hazel-nuts or wild flowers in days gone by. Surmounting the obstacle less carefully than she might have done had she expected a looker-on, it cooled neither her face nor her temper to find Mr. Vandeleur strolling quietly through the copse, smoking a cigar with his usual air of careless good-humoured superiority. She bounced off the footboard, and putting her head down, tried to pass him without speaking, but he stretched his arms across the path, and stopped her with a laugh.

Her eyes flashed angrily when she looked up in his face.

"I do believe as you're the devil!" exclaimed the girl in a voice that seemed to denote she was in earnest.

"I appreciate the compliment, Miss Fanny," said he, removing the cigar from his mouth. "But I assure you I am not, all the same. *You* are an angel though, my dear. I did not expect you for at least an hour, and as I hate waiting I am grateful for your early appearance."

"I shouldn't have come at all, only I promised," answered Miss Fanny in a disturbed voice. "And there, I wish I hadn't come at all as it is! I wish I hadn't met you in Ripley Lane! I wish I'd never set eyes on you in my life! I wish—what's the use of wishing?"

"What, indeed?" replied Vandeleur. "I should have lost a very agreeable little acquaintance; you, a tolerably useful friend. Something has gone wrong, Miss Fanny, I'm afraid. You seem put out, and it's very becoming, I give you my honour. Sit down, and tell us all about it."

"I'll not sit down, Mr. Vandeleur," protested the miller's daughter, glancing anxiously towards the river she had left.

"But I'll walk as far as the end of the wood with you. I suppose as you've got something particular to say, since you've kept your appointment so correct."

"Quite right," he answered. "Something very particular, and it won't bear delay neither. There's no time to be lost. I want to know how you're getting on?"

Miss Draper controlled herself with an effort, and spoke in a hard clear voice.

"I did what you told me. I went to Mr. Archer's yesterday, and made acquaintance with the young gentleman to-day."

"With Gerard Ainslie?" he asked.

She nodded and her colour rose.

"What do you think of him?" continued Vandeleur, smiling.

"I don't think about him at all," she flashed out. "Oh, Mr. Vandeleur, it's a shame; it's a shame! And it can't be done neither! I do believe as he's one to love the very ground a girl walks on!"

The smile deepened on his face. "Likely enough," said he quietly, "but that won't last long now he has seen *you*."

She looked a little better pleased. "Such nonsense!" she exclaimed. "What can I do?"

"This is what you can do," replied Vandeleur, never lifting his eyes higher than her boots, "and nobody else about here, or I should not have asked you. You can detach the boy from his foolish fancy as easily as I can break off this convolvulus. Look here, if it won't unwind, it must be torn asunder. If you can't work with fair means, you must use foul."

While he spoke he tore the growing creepers savagely with his fingers, laughing more than the occasion seemed to warrant. Though she could not see how his eyes gleamed, she wondered at this exuberance of mirth. Strangely enough, it seemed to sober and subdue her.

"Tell me what to do, sir," she said quietly, with a paler cheek. "You've been a good friend to me, and I'm not an ungrateful girl, Mr. Vandeleur, indeed."

"You must attach young Ainslie to yourself," he replied in the most matter-of-course tone. "It ought not to be a difficult job, and I shouldn't fancy it can be an unpleasant one. Tell the truth now, Miss Fan, wouldn't you like to have the silly boy over head and ears in love with you?"

She turned her face away and made no answer. Looking under her bonnet, he saw that she was crying.

"Do you think I have no self-respect?" she asked in a broken voice.

"I know I haven't," he answered, "but that's no rule for you. Look ye here, Miss Fanny, business is business. I shouldn't have brought you here without something to say. When you've done crying, perhaps you'll be ready to hear it."

"I'm ready now," she replied, with a steady look in his face that he did not endure for half a second.

"I gave you a month when we met, the other evening, but I've altered my mind since then. If you'll halve the time, I'll double the money. There, you won't meet so fair an offer as that every day in a market. What say you, Miss Fan? Are you game?"

She was walking with her hands clasped, and twined her fingers together as if in some deep mental conflict, but showed no other sign of distress.

"I don't like it," she said quietly, but in clear forcible tones; "I don't like it. I could do it better by either of the others. At least, I mean they seem as though they wouldn't be quite so much in earnest. And it looks such a cruel job, too, if so be as the young lady likes him—and like him she must, I'm sure. Who is the young lady, Mr. Vandeleur? You promised as you'd tell me to-day."

It was true enough. Curiosity is a strong stimulant, and he had reserved this part of the scheme to ensure Miss Draper's punctuality in keeping her appointment.

"The young lady," replied Vandeleur. "I thought you might have guessed. Miss Welby of Marston."

"Has Miss Welby got a sweetheart?" exclaimed the other in an accent of mingled jealousy, exultation, and pique. "Well, you do surprise me. And *him*! Why didn't you tell me before?"

Why, indeed? He found her much more manageable now. She listened to his instructions with the utmost deference. She even added little feminine improvements of her own. She would do her very best, she said, and that as quickly as might be, to further all his schemes. And she meant it too. She was in earnest now. She understood it all. She knew why he had broken away from her so rudely, and started after the pony-carriage like a madman. It was Miss Welby, was it? And he was courting her, was he? Then Fanny Draper learned for the first time why the afternoon had been so different from the morning. She felt now that she herself loved Gerard Ainslie recklessly, as she had never loved before. And it was to be a struggle, a

match, a deadly rivalry between herself and this young lady, who had all the odds in her favour, of station, manners, dress, accomplishments, every advantage over herself except a fierce, strong will, and a reckless, undisciplined heart.

When Vandeleur emerged alone from Ashbank on his way home he had no reason to be dissatisfied with the ardour of his partisan. He was not easily astonished, as he used often to declare, but on the present occasion he shook his head wisely more than once, and exclaimed in an audible voice—

"Well, I always thought Miss Fan wicked enough for anything, but I'd no idea even she could have so much devil in her as that!"

CHAPTER IX

A PASSAGE OF ARMS

OLD Grits was seldom wrong about the weather. The wind remained southerly, and yet the rain held off. The day after the fishing party was bright and calm. Nevertheless it smiled on two very unhappy people within a circle of three miles. The least to be pitied of this unlucky pair was Ainslie, inasmuch as his was an expected grievance, and in no way took him unawares.

When Mr. Archer granted their release the day before, it was on the express stipulation that the succeeding afternoon as well as morning should be devoted to study by his pupils, and Gerard knew that it would be impossible for him to cross the marshes for the shortest glimpse of his ladye-love till another twenty-four hours had elapsed. He could have borne his imprisonment more patiently had he not been so disappointed in his chase after the pony-carriage, had he not also felt some faint, shadowy misgivings that its driver might have disapproved of the position in which she saw him placed.

It was bad enough to miss an unexpected chance of seeing Norah; but to think that she could believe him capable of familiarity with such an individual as Miss Draper, and not to be able to justify himself, because, forsooth, he was deficient in modern history, was simply maddening. What was the Seven Years' War, with all its alternations, to the contest raging in his own breast? How could he take the slightest interest in Frederic the Great, and Ziethen, and Seidlitz, and the rest of the Prussian generals, while Norah was within a league, and yet out of reach? "What must she think of him?" he wondered; "and what was she about?"

If Miss Welby had been asked what she was about, she would have declared she was gathering flowers for the house. Anybody else would have said she was roaming here and there in an aimless, restless manner, with a pair of scissors

and a basket. Anybody else might have wondered why she could settle to no occupation, remain in no one place for more than five minutes at a time—why her cheek was pale and her eyes looked sleepless; above all, why about her lips was set that scornful smile which, like a hard frost breaking up in rain, seldom softens but with a flood of tears.

Norah knew the reason—very bitter and very painful it was. We, who have gone through the usual training of life, and come out of it more or less hardened into the cynicism we call good sense, or the indolence we dignify as resignation, can scarcely appreciate the punishment inflicted by these imaginary distresses on the young. Jealousy is hard to bear even for us, encouraged by example, cased in selfishness, and fortified by a hundred worldly aphorisms. We shrug our shoulders, we even force a laugh; we talk of human weakness, male vanity or female fickleness, as the case may be; we summon pride to our aid and intrench ourselves in an assumed humility; or we plead our philosophy, which means we do not care very much for anything but our dinners. Perhaps, after all, our feelings *are* blunted. Perhaps—shame on us!—we experience the slightest possible relief from thraldom, the faintest ray of satisfaction in reflecting that we, too, have our right to change; that for us, at no distant period, will open the fresh excitement of a fresh pursuit.

But with a young girl suffering from disappointment in her first affections there are no such counter-irritants as these. She steps at once out of her fairyland into a cold, bleak, hopeless world. It is not that her happiness is gone, her feelings outraged, her vanity humbled to the dust—but her trust is broken. Hitherto she has believed in good; now she says bitterly there is no good on the face of the earth. She has made for herself an image, which she has draped like a god, and, behold! the image is an illusion, after all—not even a stock or a stone, but a mist, a vapour, a phantom that has passed away and left a blank which all creation seems unable to fill up. It is hard to lose the love itself, but the cruel suffering is, that the love has wound itself round every trifle of her daily life. Yesterday the petty annoyance could not vex her; yesterday the homely pleasure, steeped in that hidden consciousness, became a perfect joy. And to-day it is all over! To-day there is a mockery in the sunbeam, a wail of hopeless sorrow in the breeze. Those gaudy flowers do but dazzle her with their unmeaning glare, and the scent of the standard-roses would

go near to break her heart, but that she feels she has neither hope nor heart left.

Norah Welby had been at least half an hour in the garden, and one sprig of geranium constituted the whole spoils of her basket. It was a comfort to be told by a servant that a young woman was waiting to speak with her. In her first keen pangs she was disposed, like some wounded animal, to bound restlessly from place to place, to seek relief in change of scene or attitude. They had not yet subsided into the dull, dead ache that prompts the sufferer to hide away in a corner and lie there, unnoticed and motionless in the very exhaustion of pain.

Even a London footman is not generally quick-sighted, and Mr. Welby's was a country servant all over. Nevertheless, Thomas roused himself from his reflections, whatever they might be, and noticed that his young mistress looked "uncommon queer," as he expressed it, when he announced her visitor. She did not seem to understand till he had spoken twice, and then put her hand wearily to her forehead, while she repeated vaguely—

"A young woman waiting, Thomas? Did she give any name?"

"It's the young woman from the mill," answered Thomas, who would have scorned to usher a person of Miss Draper's rank into his young mistress's presence with any of the forms he considered proper to visitors of a higher standing, and who simply nodded his head in the direction indicated for the benefit of the new arrival, observing without further ceremony—

"Miss Welby's in the garden. Come, look sharp! That's the road."

And now indeed Norah's whole countenance and deportment altered strangely from what it had been a few minutes ago. Her proud little head went up like the crest of a knight who hears the trumpet pealing for the onset. There even came a colour into her fair, smooth cheek, before so pale and wan. Her deep eyes flashed and glowed through the long, dark lashes, and her sweet lips closed firm and resolute over the small, white, even teeth. Women have a strange power of subduing their emotions which has been denied to the stronger and less impressionable sex; also, when the attack has commenced, and it is time to begin fighting in good earnest, they get their armour on and betake them to their skill of fence with a rapidity that to our slower perceptions seems as unnatural as it is alarming.

The most practised duellist that ever stood on guard might have taken a lesson from the attitude of cool, vigilant, uncompromising defiance with which Norah received her visitor.

The latter, too, was prepared for battle. Hers, however, was an aggressive mode of warfare which requires far less skill, courage, or tactics than to remain on the defensive; and, never lacking in confidence, she had to-day braced all her energies for the encounter. Nothing could be simpler than her appearance, more respectful than her manner, more demure than her curtsey, as she accosted Miss Welby with her eyes cast down to a dazzling bed of scarlet geraniums at her feet.

The two girls formed no bad specimens of their respective classes of beauty, while thus confronting each other—Norah's chiseled features, graceful head, and high bearing, contrasting so fairly with the comely face and bright physical charms of the miller's daughter.

"It's about the time of our Ripley children's school-feast, Miss Welby," said the latter; "I made so bold as to step up and ask whether you would arrange about the tea as usual?"

Norah looked very pale, but there was a ring like steel in her voice while she replied—

"I expected you, Fanny. I knew you had come home, for I saw you yesterday."

Fanny assumed an admirable air of unconsciousness.

"Really, miss?" said she. "Well, now, I was up waterside in the afternoon, and I did make sure it was your carriage as passed over Ripley Bridge."

It seemed not much of an opening; such as it was, however, Miss Welby took advantage of it. Still very grave and pale, she continued in a low, distinct voice—

"I have no right to interfere, of course, but still, Fanny, I am sure you will take what I say in good part. Do you think now that your father would approve of your attending Mr. Archer's young gentlemen in their fishing excursions up the river?"

Fanny bowed her head, and managed with great skill to execute a blush.

"Indeed, miss," she faltered, "it was only one young gentleman, and him the youngest of them as goes to school with Mr. Archer."

"I am quite aware it was Mr. Ainslie, for I am acquainted with him," pursued Norah bravely enough, but, do what she

would, there was a quiver of pain in her voice when she uttered his name, and for a moment Miss Draper felt a sting of compunction worse than all the jealousy she had experienced during her interview with Vandeleur the previous afternoon.

"I have no doubt, indeed I know, he is a perfectly gentlemanlike person," continued the young lady, as if she was repeating a lesson; "still, Fanny, I put it to your own good sense whether it would not have been wiser to remain at the mill with your father."

"Perhaps you're right, miss," replied the other, acting her part of innocent simplicity with considerable success; "and I'm sure I didn't mean no harm—nor him neither, I dare say. But he's such a nice young gentleman. So quiet and careful-like. And he begged and prayed of me so hard to show him the way up-stream, that indeed, miss, I had not the heart to deny him."

"Do you mean he asked you to go?" exclaimed Norah, and the next moment wished she had bitten her tongue off before it framed a question to which she longed yet dreaded so to hear the answer.

"Well, miss," replied Fanny candidly, "I suppose a young woman ought not to believe all that's told her by a real gentleman like Mr. Ainslie; and yet he seems so good and kind and affable, I can't think as he'd want to go and deceive a poor girl like me."

Norah felt her heart sink, and a shadow, such as she thought must be like the shadow of death, passed over her eyes; but not for an instant did her courage fail, nor her self-command desert her at her need.

"It is no question of Mr. Ainslie," said she with an unmoved face, "nor indeed of anybody in particular. I have said my say, Fanny, and I am sure you will not be offended, so we will drop the subject, if you please. And now, what can I do for you about the school-feast?"

But Fanny cared very little for the school-feast, or indeed for anything in the world but the task she had on hand, and its probable results, as they affected a new wild, foolish hope that had lately risen in her heart. With a persistence almost offensive, she tried again and again to lead the conversation back to Gerard Ainslie, but again and again she was baffled by the quiet resolution of her companion. She learned indeed that Miss Welby was somewhat doubtful as to whether she should be present at the tea-making in person, but beyond this gathered nothing more definite as to that young lady's

feelings and intentions than the usual directions about the prizes, the usual promise of assistance to the funds.

For a quarter of an hour or so Norah, stretched on the rack, bore her part in conversation on indifferent subjects in an indifferent tone, with a stoicism essentially feminine, and at the expiration of that period Fanny Draper departed, sufficiently well pleased with her morning's work. She had altered her opinion now, as most of us do alter our opinions in favour of what we wish, and dismissed all compunction from her heart in meddling with an attachment that on one side at least seemed to have taken no deep root. "She don't care for him, not really," soliloquised Miss Fanny, as the wicket-gate of the parsonage clicked behind her, and she turned her steps homeward. "I needn't have gone to worrit and fret so about it after all. It's strange too—such a nice young gentleman, with them eyes and hair. But she don't care for him, nobody needs to tell me that—no more nor a stone!"

How little she knew! How little we know each other! How impossible for one of Fanny Draper's wilful, impulsive disposition to appreciate the haughty reticence, the habitual self-restraint, above all, the capability for silent suffering of that higher nature! She thought Norah Welby did not care for Gerard Ainslie, and she judged as nine out of ten do judge of their fellows, by an outward show of indifference, born of self-scorn, and by a specious composure, partly mere trick of manner, partly resulting from inherent pride of birth.

Norah watched the departure of her visitor without moving a muscle. Like one in a dream, she marked the steps retiring on the gravel, the click of the wicket-gate. Like one in a dream too, she walked twice round the garden, pale, erect, and to all appearance tranquil, save that now and then, putting her hand to her throat, she gasped as if for breath. Then she went slowly into the house, and sought her own room, where she locked the door, and, sure that none could overlook her, flung herself down on her knees by the bedside, and wept the first bitter, scalding, cruel tears of her young life. Pride, scorn, pique, propriety, maidenly reserve, these were for the outer world, but here—she had lost him! lost him! lost him! and the agony was more than she could bear.

CHAPTER X

AN APPOINTMENT

THE post arrived at Mr. Archer's in the middle of breakfast, and formed a welcome interruption to the stagnation which was apt to settle on that repast. It is not easy for a tutor to make conversation, day after day, for three young gentlemen over whom he is placed in authority, and who are therefore little disposed to assist him in his efforts to set them at ease. Mr. Archer could not forget that, under all their assumed respect, he was still "Nobs" directly his back was turned; and a man's spirit must indeed be vigorous to flow unchecked by a consciousness that all he says and does will afford material for subsequent ridicule and caricature. Also, there are but few subjects in common between three wild, hopeful boys, not yet launched in the world, and a grave, disappointed, middle-aged man, who has borne his share of action and of suffering, has thought out half the illusions of life, and lived out all its romance. If he talks gravely he bores, if playfully he puzzles, if cynically he demoralises them. To sink the tutor is subversive of discipline; to preserve that character, ruinous to good-fellowship; so long and weary silences were prone to settle over Mr. Archer's breakfast-table, relieved only by crunching of dry toast, applications for more tea, and a hearty consumption of broiled bacon and household bread. Of the three pupils, Dolly Egremont suffered these pauses with the most impatience, betraying his feelings by restless contortions on his chair, hideous grimaces veiled by the tea-urn from Mr. Archer's eye, and a continual looking for the postman (whose arrival could be seen from the dining-room windows), unspeakably suggestive of a cheerless frame of mind described by himself as suppressed bore.

Glancing for the hundredth time down the laurel-walk to the green gate, he pushed his plate away with a prolonged yawn, nudged Gerard, who sat beside him, with an energy that sent half that young gentleman's tea into

his breast-pocket, and burst forth as usual in misquoted verse—

> "She said the day is dreary;
> He cometh not, she said.
> None of us seem very cheery,
> And I wish I was in bed!

Do you know, sir, I think this 'weak and weary post, bare-headed, sweating, knocking at the taverns,' must have got drunk already, and is not coming here at all."

Mr. Archer could not help smiling.

"How you remember things that are not of the slightest use, Egremont," he observed. "May I ask if you expect any letters of unusual importance this morning?"

"It's not that, sir," answered Dolly. "But a Government functionary, particularly a postman, has no right to be absent from his post. Mine is essentially a genius of method. I cannot bear anything like irregularity."

"I am very glad to hear it," replied Mr. Archer drily. "I should not have thought it, I confess."

"It's been my character from childhood," answered Dolly gravely; "though I must allow both Jerry here, and the Dandy, give me many an anxious moment on that score. Not to mention the postman—

> I hold that man the worst of public foes
> Who—look out, here he comes! yes, there he goes!"

Everybody laughed, for Dolly was a privileged buffoon, and a servant entering at the moment with the bag, there was a general anxiety evinced while Mr. Archer unlocked it and distributed the contents. Three for himself, none for Dolly, two for Burton, and one for Gerard Ainslie.

The latter started and blushed up to his temples with surprise and pleasure. It was the first "Official" he had ever received, and its envelope, fresh from the Horse Guards, was stamped with the important words, *On Her Majesty's Service.*

He tore it open. It contained a sufficiently dry communication, informing him that he would shortly be gazetted to an ensigncy in an infantry regiment, and directing him to acknowledge its receipt to an "obedient servant" whose name he was quite unable to decipher.

He pushed the open letter across the table to Mr. Archer, who, having just received some information of the same nature, expressed no surprise, only observing—

"We shall be sorry to lose you, Ainslie; it is sooner than I expected. Make yourself easy about your examinations. I think you are sure to pass."

He rose from the table, and the others rushed off to the pupil-room, overwhelming their companion with questions, congratulations, and chaff.

"When must you go, Jerry?"—"Are you to join directly, or will they give you leave?"—"Don't you funk being spun?"—"Is it a good regiment? How jolly to dine at mess every day!"—"I shouldn't like to be a 'Grabby' though" (this from the Dandy); "and, after all, I'd rather be a private in the cavalry than an officer in the regiment of *feet!*"

It was obvious that Granville Burton's range of experience had never included stable-duty, and that he was talking of what he knew nothing about.

Gerard Ainslie felt the *esprit de corps* already rising strong within him.

"Don't you jaw, Dandy," he replied indignantly. "You're not in the service at all yet; and I've always heard mine is an excellent regiment."

"How do you know?" laughed Dolly. "You've scarcely been in it a quarter of an hour. Never mind, Jerry, we shall be sorry to lose you. This old pupil-room will be uncommon slow with nobody but me and Dandy to keep the game alive. The Dandy has not an idea beyond tobacco—

> Yet it shall be—I shall lower to his level day by day,
> All that's fine within me growing coarse by smoking pipes of clay."

"Pipes, indeed!" exclaimed Burton literally. "I don't believe any fellow in the Army smokes better weeds than mine. You told me yourself, Dolly, yesterday, under the willows, that you never enjoyed a cigar so much as the one I gave you"—

> "Oh! it was sweet, my Granville, to catch the landward breeze,
> A-swing with good tobacco, by the mill beneath the trees,
> While I spooned the miller's daughter, and we listened to the roar
> Of the wheel that broke the water—and we voted you a bore!"

replied the incorrigible Dolly. "Yes, you have a certain glimmering of intellect as regards the Virginian plant, but I shall miss old Jerry awfully, just the same. So will you, so will Nobs, so will Fanny Draper. Don't blush, old man. She looked very sweet at you the day before yesterday; and though the Dandy here had thrown his whole mind into his collars, he never made a race of it from the time she caught sight of you till the finish. Look here! We'll

all go down together, and you shall wish her good-bye, and I'll have an improving conversation and a drop of mild ale with Grits—

> In yonder chair I see him sit,
> Three fingers round the old silver cup;
> I see his grey eyes twinkle yet
> At his own jest. He drinks it up.

A devilish bad jest, too! I say, can't one of you fellows quote something now? I've been making all the running, and I'm blown at last."

"It's about time you were," observed Burton, who had some difficulty in keeping pace with his voluble companion.

"You get these odds and ends of rhyme mixed up in your head, and when you go in for examination, the only thing you'll pass for will be a lunatic asylum!"

"Not half a bad club neither!" responded Dolly. "I saw a lot of mad fellows play a cricket-match once—Incurable Ward against Convalescents. The Incurables had it hollow. Beat 'em in one innings. I never knew a chap so pleased as the mad doctor. Long-stop was very like 'Nobs'; and they all behaved better at luncheon than either of you fellows do. Jerry, my boy, you'll come and see us before you join. I say, come in uniform, if you can."

The propriety of following out this original suggestion might have been canvassed at great length, but for the apparition of Mr. Archer's head at the pupil-room door summoning Ainslie to a private interview in his *sanctum*.

"You will have to start at once," observed the tutor, looking keenly at his pupil, and wondering why the natural exultation of a youth who has received his first commission should be veiled by a shadow of something like regret. "I have a letter from your great-uncle, desiring you should proceed to London to-night, if possible. It is sharp practice, Ainslie, but you are going to be a soldier, and must accustom yourself to march on short notice. I recollect in India,—well, that's nothing to do with it. Can you be ready for the evening train?"

"The evening train!" repeated the lad; and again a preoccupation of manner struck Mr. Archer as unusual. "Oh yes, sir!" he said, after a pause, and added, brightening up, "I should like to come and see you again, sir, when I've passed, and wish you good-bye."

Mr. Archer was not an impressionable person, but he was touched; neither was he demonstrative, still he grasped his pupil's hand with unusual cordiality.

"Tell the servants to pack your things," said he, "and come to me again at six o'clock for what money you want. In the meantime, if you have any farewells to make, you had better set about them. I have nothing further to detain you on my own account."

Any farewells to make! Of course he had. One farewell that rather than forego he would have forfeited a thousand commissions with a field-marshal's baton attached to each. He thought his tutor spoke meaningly, but this on reflection, he argued, must have been fancy. How should anybody have discovered his love for Norah Welby? Had he not treasured it up in his own heart, making no confidants, and breathing it only to the water-lilies on the marshes? Within ten minutes he was speeding across those well-known flats on a fleeter foot than usual, now that he had news of such importance to communicate at Marston Rectory. The exercise, the sunshine, the balmy summer air soon raised his spirits to their accustomed pitch. Many a dream had he indulged in during those oft-repeated walks to and from the presence of his ladye-love, but the visions had never been so bright, so lifelike, and so hopeful as to-day!

He was no longer the mere schoolboy running over during play-hours to worship in hopeless adoration at the feet of a superior being. He was a soldier, offering a future worthy of her acceptance to the woman he loved; he was a knight, ready to carry her colours exultingly to death; he was a man who need not be ashamed of offering a man's devotion and a man's truth to her who should hereafter become his wife. Yes; he travelled as far as that before he had walked a quarter of a mile. To be sure, there was an immense deal to be got through in the way of heroism and adventure indispensable to the working out of his plans in a becoming manner, worthy of her and of him. One scene on which he particularly dwelt represented a night-attack and a storming-party, of which, of course, he was destined to be the leader. He could see the rockets shooting up across the midnight sky; could hear the whispers of the men in their greatcoats, with their white haversacks slung, mustered ready and willing, under cover of the trenches. He was forming them with many a good-humoured jest and rough word of encouragement, ere he put himself at their head; and now, with the thunder of fieldpieces, and the rattle of smallarms, and groans and cheers, and shouts and curses ringing in his ears, he was over the parapet, the place was carried, the enemy retiring, and a decorated colonel,

struck down by his own sword, lay before him prostrate and bleeding to the death! A *tableau*, bright and vivid, if not quite so natural as reality. And all this, in order that, contrary to the usages of polite warfare, he might strip the said colonel of his decorations and bring them home to lay at Miss Welby's feet! It was characteristic, too, that he never thought of the poor slain officer, nor the woman that may have loved *him*.

Altogether, by the time Gerard reached the wicket-gate in the parsonage wall, his own mind was made up, that ere a few minutes elapsed he would be solemnly affianced to Norah, and that their union was a mere question of time, Nothing to speak of! Say half a dozen campaigns, perhaps, with general actions, wounds, Victoria Crosses, promotions, and so on, to correspond.

Why did his heart fail him more than usual when he lifted the latch? Why did it sink down to his very boots when he observed no chair, no book, no rickety table, no work-basket, and no white muslin on the deserted lawn?

It leaped into his mouth again though, when he saw the drawing-room windows shut and the blinds down. Even its outside has a wonderful faculty of expressing that a house is untenanted. And long before his feeble summons at the door-bell produced the cook, with her gown unhooked and her apron fastened round her waist, Gerard felt that his walk had been in vain.

"Is Miss Welby at home?" asked he, knowing perfectly well she was not, and giving himself up blindly to despair.

"Not at home, sir," answered the cook, proffering for the expected card a finger and thumb discreetly covered by the corner of her apron. She knew Gerard by sight, and was slightly interested in him, as "Mr. Archer's gent what come after our young lady." She was sorry to see him look so white, and thought his voice strangely husky when he demanded, as a forlorn hope, if he could see Mr. Welby?

"Not here, sir; the family be gone to London," she answered resolutely; but added, being merciful in her strength, "they'll not be away for long, sir. Miss Welby said as they was sure to be back in six weeks."

Six weeks! He literally gasped for breath. The woman was about to offer him a glass of water, but he found his voice at last, and muttered, more to himself than the servant, "Surely she would write to me! I wonder if I shall get a letter?"

"It's Mr. Ainslie, isn't it?" said the cook, who knew

perfectly well it was, "I do think, sir, as there's a letter for you in the post-bag. I'll step in and fetch it."

So she "stepped in and fetched it." She was a kind-hearted woman. Long ago she had lovers of her own. Perhaps even now she had not quite given up the idea. She was not angry, though many women would have been, that Gerard forgot to thank her—seizing the precious despatch, and carrying it off to devour it by himself, without a word: on the contrary, returning to her scrubbing and her dish-scouring, she only observed, "Poor young chap!" comparing him, though disparagingly, with a former swain of her own, who was in the pork-butchering line, had a shock head of red hair, and weighed fourteen stone.

Out of sight and hearing, Gerard opened his letter with a beating heart. Its contents afforded but cold comfort to one who had been lately indulging in visions such as his. It was dated late the night before, and ran thus:—

"DEAR MR. AINSLIE,—In case you should call on us to-morrow, papa desires me to say that we shall be on our way to London. We are going to pay Uncle Edward a visit, and it is very uncertain when we return.

"I think I caught a glimpse of you fishing at Ripley Bridge yesterday, and hope you had good sport.—Yours sincerely, L. WELBY."

It was hard to bear. Though he had now a character to support as an officer and a gentleman, I shouldn't wonder if the tears came thick and fast into his eyes while he folded it up. So cold, so distant, so unfeeling! And that last sentence seemed the cruellest stroke of all. Poor boy! A little more experience would have shown him how that last sentence explained the whole—would have taught him to gather from it the brightest auguries of success. Unless offended, she would never have written in so abrupt a strain; and why should she be offended unless she cared for him? It was like a woman, not to resist inflicting that last home-thrust; yet to a practised adversary it would have exposed her weakness, and opened up her whole guard. But Gerard was no practised adversary, and he carried a very sore heart back with him across the marshes. The only consolation he could gather was that Miss Welby had gone to London, and he would find her there. In this also he betrayed the simplicity of youth. He had yet to discover that London is a very large place for a search after the person you are most desirous to see, and that, when found, the person is likely to be less interested in you there than in any other locality on the face of the earth.

CHAPTER XI

A DISAPPOINTMENT

NEITHER the threatened six weeks, nor even five of them, had elapsed before Mr. Welby and his daughter returned to their pretty home. She had never felt so glad to get back in her life. Ainslie's stay in London had been so short as to preclude the possibility of his seeking Norah with any chance of success, and a combination of feelings, amongst which predominated no slight apprehension that her father might open the letter, prevented him from trusting one to be forwarded to her young mistress by his friend the cook. So Miss Welby returned to Marston with a firm conviction that Gerard was still at Mr. Archer's, and would cross the marshes to visit her, fond and submissive as usual. She had forgiven him in her own heart long ago. It hurt it too much to bear ill-will against its lord. The first day she was in London she found a hundred excuses for his fancied disloyalty; the second, shed some bitter tears over her own cold, cruel letter; by the end of the week had persuaded herself she was quite in the wrong, liked him better than ever, and was dying to get home again and tell him so. She never doubted the game was in her own hands; and although when the time for return drew near—accelerated a whole week at her request—she anticipated the pleasure of punishing him just a little for rendering her so unhappy, it was with a steadfast purpose to make amends thereafter by such considerate kindness as should rivet his fetters faster than before.

She had said they were to be away six weeks; therefore she told herself there could be no chance of his coming over

for a while, until he had learnt by accident they had returned. Nevertheless, on the very first day, she established herself with chair, table, and work-basket on the lawn under the lime-tree, and was very much disappointed when tea-time came and he had not arrived.

Next day it rained heavily, and this she deemed fortunate, because, as she argued somewhat inconsequently, it would have prevented his coming at anyrate, and would afford another twenty-four hours for the usual tide of country gossip to carry him the news of her return. The following morning she was sure of him, and her face, when she came down to breakfast, looked as bright and pure as the summer sky itself.

It was Norah's custom to hold a daily interview with the cook at eleven o'clock, avowedly for the purpose of ordering dinner; that is to say, this domestic wrote down a certain programme on a slate, of which, if she wished the repast to be well dressed, it was good policy in her young lady to approve. On these occasions the whole economy of the household came under discussion, and those arrangements were made on which depended the excellence of the provender, the tidiness of the rooms, the softness of the beds, and the orderly conduct of the servants. The third morning, then, after her arrival, the cook, an inveterate gossip, having exhausted such congenial subjects as soap, candles, stock, dripping, and table-linen, bethought herself of yet one more chance to prolong their interview.

"The letters had all come to hand safe," she hoped, "according to the directions Miss Welby left for forwarding of them correct."

Miss Welby frankly admitted they arrived in due course.

The cook had been "careful to post them herself regular, so as there could be no mistake. All but one. She'd forgotten to mention it, and that was the very day as Miss Welby left."

Norah's heart leaped with a wild hope. Could it be possible that cruel, odious, vile production had never reached him after all?

The cook proceeded gravely to excuse herself.

"She had seen the address—it was the only letter in the box; the young gentleman come over himself that very morning, while she (the cook) was cleaning up. He seemed anxious, poor young gentleman! and looked dreadful ill, so she made bold to give it him then and there. She hoped as she done right."

Norah's cheek turned pale. He looked ill—poor, poor fellow! And he was anxious. Of course he was. No doubt he had hurried over to explain all, and had found her gone, leaving that cruel letter (how she hated it now!) to cut him to the heart. She had been rash, passionate, unkind, unjust! She had lowered both herself and him. Never mind. He would be here to-day, in an hour at the latest; and she would beg pardon humbly, fondly, promising never to mistrust nor to vex him again. No; there were no more orders. The cook had done quite right about the letters, and they would dine at half-past seven as usual.

It was a relief to be left alone again with her own thoughts. It was a happiness to look at the lengthening shadows creeping inch by inch across the lawn, and expect him every moment now, as luncheon came and went, and the afternoon passed away. But the shadows overspread the whole lawn, the dew began to fall, the dressing-bell rang, and still no Gerard Ainslie.

Mr. Welby attributed his daughter's low spirits during dinner to reaction after the excitement of a London life. He had felt it himself many years ago, and shuddered with the remembrance even now. At dessert a bright thought struck him, and he looked up.

"It's the Archery Meeting to-morrow at Oakover. Isn't it, Norah? My dear, hadn't you better go?"

"I think I shall," answered Miss Welby, who fully intended it. "Perhaps Lady Baker will take me. If she can't I must fall back on the Browns."

"My dear, I will take you myself," replied her father stoutly, while he filled his glass.

She looked pleased.

"Oh, papa, how nice! But, dear, you'll be so dreadfully bored. There's a cold dinner, you know. And the thing lasts all day, and dancing very likely at night. However, we can come away before that."

"You're an unselfish girl, Norah," said her father, "as you always were. I tell you I'll go, and I'll stay and see it out if they dance till dawn. You shall drive me there with the ponies, and they can come back and bring the brougham for us at night. No, you needn't thank me, my dear. I'm not so good as you think. I want to have a few hours in Vandeleur's library, for I'm by no means satisfied with the 'Sea-breeze Chorus' in any of my editions here. It seems clear one word at least must be wrong. The whole spirit of the 'Medea,' the 'Hecuba,' and, indeed, every play of

Euripides— But I won't inflict a Greek particle—no, nor a particle of Greek—on you, my dear. Ring the bell, and let's have some tea."

So Norah went to bed, after another day of disappointment, buoyed up once more by hope,—Gerard was sure to be at the Archery Meeting. Mr. Archer's young gentlemen always made a point of attending these gatherings; and Dolly Egremont had, on one occasion, even taken a prize. "Yes," thought Miss Welby, "to-morrow, at last, I am sure to meet him. Perhaps he is offended. Perhaps he won't speak to me. Never mind! He'll see I'm sorry at anyrate, and he'll know that I haven't left off caring for him. Yes, I'll put on that lilac he thought so pretty. It's a little worn, but I don't mind. I hope it won't rain! I wish to-morrow was come!"

To-morrow came, and it didn't rain. Starting after luncheon in the pony-carriage, Norah and her father agreed that this was one of the days sent expressly from Paradise for breakfasts, fêtes, picnics, etc., but which so rarely reach their destination.

At Oakover everything seemed in holiday dress for the occasion. The old trees towered in the full luxuriance of summer foliage. The lawn, fresh mown, smiled smooth and comely, like a clean-shaved face. The stone balustrades and gravel walks glared and glittered in the sun. The garden was one blaze of flowers. Already a flapping marquee was being pitched for refreshments, and snowy bell-tents dotted the sward, for the different purposes of marking scores, assorting prizes, and carrying on flirtations. The targets, leaning backward in jovial defiance, offered their round bluff faces with an air that seemed to say, "Hit me, if you can!" and it is but justice to admit that, in one or two instances, they had paid the penalty of their daring with a flesh wound or so about the rims.

When Mr. Welby and his daughter arrived on the ground, a few flights of arrows had already been shot, and the archers were walking in bands to and fro between the butts, with a solemnity that denoted the grave nature of their pastime. Well might old Froissart, on whose countrymen, indeed, a flight of English arrows made no slight impression, describe our people as "taking their pleasure sadly, after the manner of their nation."

If there was one social duty which Mr. Vandeleur fulfilled better than another, it was that of receiving his guests. He had the knack of putting people at ease from the outset. He made them feel they were conferring a favour on himself by

visiting his home, while at the same time he preserved so much of dignity and self-respect as conveyed the idea that to confer favours on such a man was by no means waste of courtesy. For Mr. Welby he had a cordial greeting and a jest, for Norah a graceful compliment and a smile.

"The shooters have already begun, Miss Welby," said he, turning to welcome a fresh batch of guests; "and there's tea in the large tent. If you miss your chaperon at any time, you will be sure to find him in the library."

So Norah walked daintily on towards the targets, and many an eye followed her with approving glances as she passed. It is not every woman who can walk across a ballroom, a lawn, or such open space, unsupported, with dignity and ease. Miss Welby's undulating figure never looked so well as when thus seen aloof from others, moving smooth and stately, with a measured step and graceful bearing peculiarly her own. The smooth, elastic gait was doubtless the result of physical symmetry, but the inimitable charm of manner sprang from combined modesty and self-respect within.

Welby, a few paces behind, felt proud of his handsome daughter, looked it, and was not ashamed even to profess his admiration. There was a quaking heart all the time though under this attractive exterior. With one eager, restless glance Norah took in the whole company, and Gerard was not there. Worse still, Dolly Egremont had just made a "gold," and Dandy Burton was shooting aimlessly over the target.

Poor Norah began to be very unhappy. Luckily, however, she got hold of Lady Baker, and that welcome dowager, who was rather deaf, rather blind, and rather stupid, offered the best possible refuge till a fellow-pupil should come up to make his bow, and she might ask—in a roundabout way, be sure—what had become of Gerard Ainslie.

Mr. Archer's young gentlemen had hitherto taken advantage with considerable readiness of the very few opportunities that offered themselves to pay attention to Miss Welby. To-day, nevertheless, perverse fate decreed that both Egremont and Burton should be so interested in their shooting as to remain out of speaking distance. The Dandy, indeed, took his hat off with an elaborate flourish, but having been captured, in the body at least, by a young lady in pink, was unable, for the present, to do more than express with such mute homage his desire to lay himself at Miss Welby's feet.

It was weary work that waiting, waiting for the one dear face. Weary work to see everybody round her merry-making,

and to be hungering still for the presence that would turn this penance into a holiday for herself as it was for the rest. There was always the hope that he might come late with Mr. Archer, who had not appeared. And to so frail a strand Norah clung more and more tenaciously as the day went down, and this her last chance died out too. Even Lady Baker remarked the worn, weary look on that pale face, and proposed the usual remedy for a heartache in polite circles, to go and have some tea.

"This standing so long would founder a troop-horse, my dear," said her ladyship. "Let's try for a cup of tea. Mr. Vandeleur told me it was ready two hours ago."

Norah assented willingly enough. He might be in the tent after all, and for a while this spark of hope kindled into flame, and then went out like the rest.

In the tent, however, were collected the smartest of the county people, including several young gentlemen, professed admirers of Miss Welby. They gathered round her the instant she appeared. Partly yielding to the exigences of society, partly to the force of habit, and partly to intense weariness and vexation, she joined in their talk, accepting the incense offered her with a liveliness of tone and manner betrayed for the first time to-day. Lady Baker began to think her young friend was "rather giddy for a clergyman's daughter, and a confirmed flirt, like the rest of them."

And so the day wore on, and the shooters unstrung their bows, making excuses for their inefficiency. Presently the prizes were distributed, the company adjourned into the house, rumours went about of an *impromptu* dance, and people gathered in knots, as if somewhat at a loss till it should begin. Mr. Vandeleur moving from group to group, with pleasant words and smiles, at last stopped by Norah, and keeping on the deafest side of Lady Baker, observed in a low tone—

"Your father is still wrestling hard with a Greek misprint in the library. He won't want you to go away for hours yet. We think of a little dancing, Miss Welby; when would you like to begin?"

It was flattering to be thus made queen of the revels; he meant it should be, and she felt it so. Still she was rather glad that Lady Baker did not hear. She was glad, too, that her host did not secure her for the first quadrille, when she saw Dandy Burton advancing with intention in his eye, and she resolved to extract from that self-satisfied young gentleman all the information for which she pined.

Vandeleur had debated in his own mind whether he should dance with her or not, but having a certain sense of the fitness of things, decided to abstain.

"No! hang it!" he said to himself that morning while shaving; "after a fellow's forty it's time to shut up. I've had a queerish dance or two in my day, and I can't complain. How I could open their eyes here if I chose!" and he chuckled, that unrepentant sinner, over sundry well-remembered scenes of revelry and devilry in the wild wicked times long ago.

The band struck up, the dancers paired, the set was forming, and Burton, closely pursued by Dolly Egremont, secured his partner.

"Too late!" exclaimed the triumphant cavalier to his fellow-pupil. "Miss Welby's engaged. Besides, Dolly, she considers you too fat to dance."

An indignant disclaimer from Miss Welby was lost in Dolly's good-humoured rejoinder.

"You go for a waist, Dandy," said he, "and I for a chest—that's all the difference. Besides, it's a well-known fact that the stoutest men always dance the lightest. You've got a square—Miss Welby will, perhaps, give me the next round—

> Turn, Fortune, turn thy wheel and lower the proud
> Dandy! you dress too low, you dance too loud."

But Miss Welby was afraid she couldn't—didn't think she should waltz at all—felt a little headache, and wondered how Mr. Egremont could talk such nonsense! Then she took her station by her partner, and began. It was more difficult to pump the Dandy than she expected. In the first place, he had thrown his whole mind into his costume, which, indeed, it is but justice to admit, left nothing to be desired; secondly, what little attention he might otherwise have spared was distracted by the unconcealed admiration lavished on him by his *vis-à-vis*, the young lady in pink; and thirdly, his own idea of conversation was a running fire of questions, without waiting for answers, alternated by profuse compliments, too personal to be quite agreeable.

Don't you waltz, Miss Welby?" said he, the instant they paused to allow of the side couples performing the dignified motions they had themselves executed. "You've got just the figure for waltzing; I'm sure you must waltz well. Now I think of it, I fancy I've seen you waltz with Gerard Ainslie."

Perhaps he had. Perhaps that was the reason she didn't

waltz now. Perhaps she had made this absentee a promise that men selfishly exact, and even loving women accord rather unwillingly, never to waltz with anybody else. Perhaps a difference of opinion at a previous archery meeting of which we have heard may have arisen from a discussion on this very subject. I know not. At anyrate, here was an opening, and Norah took advantage of it.

"He's a good waltzer—Mr. Ainslie," said she drearily. "Why is he not here to-night?"

"Do you think he *is* quite a good waltzer?" asked her partner. "He dances smoothly enough, but don't you think he holds himself too stiff? And then, a fellow can't dance you know, if— It's your turn to go on!"

An untimely interruption, while she carried out a ridiculous pantomime with the gentleman opposite—a swing with both hands in the Dandy's—and a return to the previous question.

"You were going to tell me why Mr. Ainslie didn't come with you."

"I don't want to talk about Ainslie," answered the Dandy, with a killing smile. "I want to talk about yourself, Miss Welby. That's a charming dress you've got on. I had no idea lilac could— The others are waiting for us to begin."

And so the grand round came, and still Norah had not extorted an answer to the question next her heart. She looked paler and more dejected than ever when her partner led her through the dancing-room, proposing wine and water, ices, and such restoratives. She was very heart-sick and tired—tired of the dancing, the music, the whole thing—not a little tired of Dandy Burton himself and his platitudes. Succour, however, was at hand. Vandeleur had been watching her through the whole quadrille, only waiting his opportunity. He pounced on it at once.

"You find the heat oppressive, Miss Welby," said he, extricating her from Burton's arm, and offering his own. "I never can keep this room cool enough. Let me take you to the conservatory, where there is plenty of air, and a fountain of water besides to souse you if you turn faint."

It was a relief to hear his cheerful, manly tones after the Dandy's vapid sentences. She took his arm gratefully, and accompanied him, followed by meaning glances from two or three observant ladies, who would not have minded seeing their own daughters in the same situation.

"She took his arm gratefully."

CHAPTER XII

REACTION

"THIS *is* delightful!" exclaimed Norah, drawing a full breath of the pure, cool night air that played through the roomy conservatory, and looking round in admiration on the quaintly twisted pillars, the inlaid pavement, the glittering fountain, and the painted lanterns hanging amongst broad-leafed tropical plants and gorgeous flowers. It seemed a different world from the ballroom, and would have been Paradise, if only Gerard had been there!

"I am glad you like it, Miss Welby," said Vandeleur, with a flattering emphasis on the pronoun. "Now sit down, while I get you some tea, and I'll give you leave to go and dance again directly I see more colour in your face. I take good care of you, don't I?"

"You do, indeed!" she answered gratefully; for the wounded, anxious heart there was something both soothing and reassuring in the kindly manner and frank, manly voice.

A certain latent energy, a suppressed power, lurked about Vandeleur, essentially pleasing to women, and Norah felt the influence of these male qualities to their full extent while he brought her the promised tea, disposed her chair out of the draught, and seated himself by her side.

Then he led the conversation gradually to the news she most desired to hear. It was Vandeleur's habit to effect a good-humoured superiority in his intercourse with young ladies, as of a man who was so much their senior that he might profess interest without consequence, and admiration without impertinence. Perhaps he found it answer. Perhaps, after all, it was but the result of an inherent *bonhomie*, and a frankness bordering on eccentricity. At anyrate, he began in his usual strain—

"How kind of you, Miss Welby, to come and sit quietly with an old gentleman in an ice-house when you might be dancing forty miles an hour with a young one in an oven. Dandy Burton, or whatever his name is—the man with the

shirt-front—must hate me pretty cordially. That's another conquest, Miss Welby; and so is his friend, the fat one. You spare none of us. Old and young! No quarter. No forgiveness. Let me put your cup down!"

"I like the fat one best," she answered, smiling, while she gave him her cup.

He moved away to place it in safety, and she did not fail to notice with gratitude that he kept his back turned while he proceeded—

"The other's the flower of them all, Miss Welby, to my fancy, and I am very glad I was able to do him a turn. He got his commission, you know, the very day you left Marston. I should think he must have joined by now. I daresay he is hard at work at the goose-step already."

When he looked at her again, he could see by the way her whole face had brightened that she heard this intelligence for the first time. He observed, with inward satisfaction, that there could have been no interchange of correspondence; and reflecting that young ladies seldom read the papers very diligently, or interest themselves in gazettes, was able to appreciate the value of the news he had just communicated.

Norah preserved her self-command, as, whatever may be their weakness under physical pressure, the youngest and simplest woman can in a moral emergency. It was unspeakable relief to learn there was a reason for his past neglect and present non-appearance; but she felt on thorns of anxiety to hear where he had gone, what he was doing, when there would be a chance of seeing him again; and therefore she answered in a calm, cold voice that by no means deceived her companion—

"I never heard a word of it! I am very glad for Mr. Ainslie's sake. I believe he was exceedingly anxious to get his commission. Oh! Mr. Vandeleur, how kind of you to interest yourself about him!"

"We are all interested in him, I think, Miss Welby," he answered, with a meaning smile. "I told you long ago I thought he had the makings of a man about him. Well, he has got a fair start. We won't lose sight of him, any of us; but you know he must follow up his profession."

She knew it too well, and would not have stood in the way of his success; no, not to have seen him every day, and all day long. And now, while she felt it might be years before they would meet again, there was yet a pleasure in talking of him, after the suspense and uncertainty of the last three days, that threw a reflected glow of interest even on the

person to whom she could unbosom herself. Next to Gerard, though a long way off, and papa, of course, she felt she liked Mr. Vandeleur better than anybody.

He read her like a book, and continued to play the same game.

"I thought you would be pleased to know about him," said he, keeping his eyes, according to custom, averted from her face. "The others are all very well, but Ainslie is really a promising lad, and some day, Miss Welby, you and I will be proud of him. But he's only reached the foot of the ladder yet, and it takes a long time to get to the top. Come, Miss Welby, your tea has done you good. You're more like yourself again; and do you know that is a very becoming dress you have got on? I wish I was young enough to dance with you, but I'm not, so I'll watch you instead. It's no compliment to you to say you're very good to look at indeed."

"I am glad you think so," she answered, quitting his arm at the door of the dancing-room; and he fancied, though it was probably only fancy, that she had leaned heavier on it while they returned. At anyrate, Vandeleur betook himself to the society of his other guests, by no means dissatisfied with the progress he had made.

And Norah embarked on the intricacies of the Lancers, under the pilotage of Dolly Egremont, who contrived to make her laugh heartily more than once before the set was finished. She recovered her spirits rapidly. After all, was she not young, handsome, well-dressed, admired, and fond of dancing? She put off reflection, misgivings, sorrow, memories, and regrets, till the ball was over at last. Lady Baker, dull as she might be, was yet sufficiently a woman to notice the change in her young friend's demeanour, and having seen her come from the conservatory on their host's arm, not only drew her own conclusions, but confided them to her neighbour, Mrs. Brown.

"My dear," said her ladyship, "I've found out something. Mr. Vandeleur will marry again; you mark my words. And he's made his choice in this very room to-night."

Mrs. Brown, a lady of mature years, with rather a false smile, and very false teeth, showed the whole of them, well-pleased, for she owned a marriageable daughter, at that moment flirting egregiously with Vandeleur, in the same room; but her face fell when Lady Baker, whose impartial obtuseness spared neither friend nor foe, continued in the same monotonous voice—

"He might do worse, and he might do better. He's done some foolish things in his life, and perhaps he thinks it's time

to reform. I hope he will, I'm sure. She's giddy and flighty, no doubt; but I daresay it's the best thing for him, after all!"

Mrs. Brown, assenting, began to have doubts about her daughter's chance.

"Who is it? and how d'ye know?" she demanded rather austerely, though in a guarded whisper.

"It's Norah Welby, and I heard him ask her," replied Lady Baker recklessly, and in an audible voice.

"Poor girl! I pity her!" said the other, touching her forehead, as she passed into the supper-room and commenced on cold chicken and tongue.

She pitied herself, poor Norah, an hour afterwards, looking blankly out from the brougham window on the dismal grey of the summer's morning. Papa was fast asleep in his corner, satisfied with his victory over the Greek particle, and thoroughly persuaded that his darling had enjoyed her dance. The pleasure, the excitement was over, and now the reaction had begun. It seemed so strange, so blank, so sad, to leave one of these festive gatherings, and not to have danced with Gerard, not even to have seen him; worse than all, to have no meeting in anticipation at which she could tell him how she had missed him, for which she could long and count the hours as she used to do when every minute brought it nearer yet. What was the use of counting hours now, when years would intervene before she should look on his frank young face, hear his kind melodious voice? Her eyes filled and ran over, but papa was fast asleep, so what did it signify? She was so lonely, so miserable! In all the darkness there was but one spark of light, in all the sorrow but one grain of consolation. Strangely enough, or rather, perhaps, according to the laws of sympathy and the force of association, that light, that solace seemed to identify themselves with the presence and companionship of Mr. Vandeleur.

CHAPTER XIII

GOOSE-STEP

FEW places could perhaps be less adapted for a private rehearsal than the staircase of a lodging-house in a provincial town. A provincial town enlivened only by a theatre open for six weeks of the year, and rejoicing in the occasional presence of the depôt from which a marching regiment on foreign service drew its supplies of men and officers. Nevertheless, this unpromising locality had been selected for the purpose of studying his part by an individual whose exterior denoted he could belong to no other profession than that of an actor. As the man stood gesticulating on the landing, he appeared unconscious of everything in the world but the character it was his purpose to assume. Fanny Draper, dodging out of a small, humbly furnished bedroom, was somewhat startled by the energy with which this enthusiast threw himself at her feet, and seizing her hand in both his own, exclaimed with alarming vehemence—

"Adorable being, has not your heart long since apprised ye that Rinaldo is your devoted slave? He loves ye; he worships ye; he lives but in your glances; he dies beneath your"—

"Lor', Mr. Bruff!" exclaimed Fanny, "why, how you go on! I declare love-making seems never to be out of your head."

Mr. Bruff, thus adjured, rose, not very nimbly, to his feet, and assuming, with admirable versatility, what he believed to be the air of a man of consummate fashion, apologised for the eccentricity of his demeanour.

"Madam," said he, "I feel that on this, as on former occasions, your penetration will distinguish between the man and his professional avocations. I am now engrossed with the part of a lover in genteel comedy. My exterior will doubtless suggest to you that I am—eh? what shall I say?—not exactly disqualified for the character!"

Fanny glanced at his exterior—a square figure, a tightly

buttoned coat, a close-shaved face, marked with deep lines, and illumined by a prominent red nose.

She laughed and shook her head.

"Don't keep me long then, Mr. Bruff, and don't make love to me in earnest, please, more than you can help."

While she spoke she looked anxiously along the passage, as though afraid of observation.

Mr. Bruff at once became Rinaldo to the core.

"Stand *there*, madam, I beg of you," said he. "A little farther off, if you please. Head turned somewhat away, and a softening glance. Could you manage a softening glance, do you think, when I come to the cue 'and dies beneath your scorn'? Are you ready?" and Mr. Bruff plumped down on his knees once more to begin it all over again.

Fanny threw herself into the part. It was evidently not the first time that she had thus served as a lay-figure, so to speak, for the prosecution of Mr. Bruff's studies in his art. She sneered, she flouted, she bridled, she languished, and finally bent over his close-cropped head in an access of tenderness relieved by a flood of tears, with an air of passionate reality that, as Mr. Bruff observed while he wiped the dust from his trousers, and the perspiration from his face, was "more touching and infinitely more true than nature itself."

"You were born to be an actress," said he; "and I shall take care that you have box-orders every night while our company remains. It is a pleasure to know, even in such empty houses as these, that there is one person to whom a man can play and feel that his efforts are appreciated, and the niceties of his calling understood."

Then Mr. Bruff lifted his hat with an air combining, as he was persuaded, the roistering demeanour of professed libertinism with the dignity of a stage nobleman, *siècle Louis Quatorze*, and went his way rejoicing to the adjacent tavern.

Fanny must, indeed, have been a good actress. No sooner was he gone than her whole face fell, and on its fresh rosy beauty came that anxious look it is so painful to see in the countenances of the young—the look that is never there unless the conscience be ill at ease—the look of a wounded, weary spirit dissatisfied with itself. She waited on the landing for a minute or two, listening intently, then stole downstairs, glided along the passage on tiptoe, and with a pale cheek and beating heart turned the handle of the sitting-room door.

The apartment was empty, and Fanny drew breath. On

the table lay a letter that had arrived but a few minutes by the post. She pounced upon it, and fled upstairs as noiselessly, but far more quickly than she came down. Then she locked the door, and tore open the envelope with the cruel gesture of one who destroys some venomous or obnoxious reptile.

Had she been but half an hour later, had the post been delayed, had an accident happened to the mail-train, my story would never have been written. Ah! these little bits of paper, what destinies they carry about with them, under their trim envelopes and their demure, neatly written addresses! We stick a penny stamp on their outside, and that modest insurance covers a freight that is sometimes worth more than all the gold and silver in the country. How we thirst for them to arrive! How blank our faces, and how dull our hearts, when they fail us! How bitter we are, how unkind and unjust towards the guiltless correspondent, whom we make answerable for a hundred possibilities of accident! And with what a reaction of tenderness returns the flow of an affection that has been thus obstructed for a day!

Fanny read the letter over more than once. The first time her face took the leaden, ashy hue of the dead; but her courage seldom failed her long, either for good or evil, and there was a very resolute look about her eyes and mouth ere she was half-way through the second perusal. Had it reached its rightful owner, I think it would have been covered with kisses and laid next to a warm, impulsive, wayward, but loving heart. It was a production, too, that might have been read aloud at Charing Cross without prejudice to the writer's modesty and fair fame. Here it is:—

"DEAR MR. AINSLIE,—I have to thank you for your letter in papa's name and my own. He was very much pleased to hear you had joined your regiment, and we all wish you every success and happiness in your new profession. We were disappointed not to see you before you left Mr. Archer, who always speaks of you as his *favourite pupil*; and, indeed, I had no idea, when we went to London, that you were going to leave our neighbourhood so soon. We should certainly have put off our journey for a day or two had we thought we were not even to bid you good-bye. But you know you have our very best wishes for your welfare. I will give your message to papa, and shall be so glad to hear again if we can be of any service to you here. Even if you have nothing *very particular to say*, you may find time to send us a few lines. Your favourite roses are not yet faded, and I gathered some this morning, which are standing on my writing-table now. Good-bye, dear Mr. Ainslie, with kindest regards from us all, believe me ever,—Yours very truly,

LEONORA WELBY.

"MARSTON RECTORY, *Sept. —th.*"

Then the last page was crossed (quite unnecessarily, for there was plenty of space below the signature) with two

lines,—"I think I have written you a letter as correct and proper as your own, but I was *so* glad to get it all the same."

Fanny's smile was not pleasant when she concluded this harmless effusion. It deepened and hardened round her mouth, too, while she placed the letter in an envelope, sealed it carefully, and directed it to John Vandeleur, Esq., Oakover, ——shire; but it left her face very grave and sad, under a smart little bonnet and double black veil, while she walked stealthily to the post-office and dropped her missive in the box.

She had plenty of time to spare. Gerard was still in the little messroom of the 250th Regiment, smoking a cigar, after the squad-drill it was necessary he should undergo, and thinking of Norah, perhaps less than usual, because he was persuaded that his own letter must ere this have come to hand and that she would answer it at once.

He had joined his regiment, or rather its depôt, immediately on his appointment, without availing himself of the two months' leave indulgently granted by the Horse Guards on such occasions,—his great-uncle, an arbitrary and unreasonable old gentleman, having made this condition on purchasing the commission and outfit for his relative. Ainslie arrived in barracks consequently without uniforms, and without furniture, so he learned a good deal of his drill in a shooting-jacket; and as the depôt was on the eve of a march, took cheap lodgings in the neighbourhood, which he seldom visited but to dress for dinner and go to bed. He had led this life for some little time before he could summon up courage to write to Miss Welby, and he was now looking forward with a thrill of delight to finding her answer at his lodgings, when he returned, which he meant to do the moment he had finished his cigar.

The conversation of Ensign Ainslie and his comrades, I am bound to admit, was not instructive nor even amusing. They were smoking and partaking also of soda-water, strengthened by stimulants, in a bare, comfortless, little room, littered with newspapers, and redolent of tobacco, both stale and fresh. Time seemed to hang heavy on their hands. They lounged and straddled in every variety of attitude, on hard wooden chairs; and they spoke in every variety of tone, from the gruff bass of the red-faced veteran to the broken *falsetto* of the lately joined recruit. A jaded mess-waiter, or a trim orderly sergeant, appeared at intervals; but such interruptions in no way affected the flow of conversation, which turned on the personal charms of a lady, ascertained

to have arrived lately in the town, and the mystery attached to her choice of residence.

Captain Hughes, a colonial lady-killer of much experience, expressed himself in terms of unqualified approval.

"The best-looking woman I've seen since we left Manchester," insisted the captain dogmatically. "I followed her all the way down Market Street yesterday, and I give you my honour, sir, she's as straight on her ankles as an opera-dancer; with a figure—I haven't seen such a figure since I got my company, I'll tell you. She reminded me of the Slasher. You remember the Slasher, Jones?—girl that threw you over, last fall, so coolly, at Quebec."

Jones, a young warrior of fair complexion, and unobtrusive manners, owned that he had not forgotten; blushing the while uncomfortably, because that the Slasher's glances had wounded him in a vital place.

"I know where she lives, too," resumed the captain triumphantly. "I followed the trail, sir, like a Red Indian. Ah! they can't dodge a fellow that's had my practice in the game, even if they want to, which they don't. I'd two checks —one at a grocer's and one at a glove-shop; but I ran her to ground at last."

"You'll tell *me!*" lisped little Baker, commonly called Crumbs, the youngest of the party, senior only to Gerard in the regiment, but looking like a mere child by his side. "You'll tell *me*, of course, because I'm in your own company. You can't get out of it; and we'll walk down this afternoon, and call together."

"Crumbs!" observed his captain impressively, "you're the last man in the regiment I'd trust." (Crumbs looked immensely delighted.) "Besides, you little beggar, you ought to be back at school; and if I did my duty as the captain of your company, I'd make the Adjutant write to your mother and tell her so."

Crumbs, no whit abashed, ordered a tumbler of brandy and soda as big as himself, from which he presently emerged, breathless, and observed, for anybody to take up—"Ainslie's cut you all out. He lodges in the same house!"

Every eye was now turned towards Ainslie, and Captain Hughes began to fear a rival in the line he had followed hitherto with such success. "I don't think it can be the same woman," said he, checking the mirth of the youngsters with a frown. "She lives in Ainslie's lodgings, I grant you, but she can only have come there yesterday, or I must have seen her before. Isn't it so, Ainslie?"

"You know more about it than I do," answered the unconscious Gerard. "The only women I've seen in the house are Mother Briggs herself and a poor servant-girl they call H'ann—very strong of the H. It must have been Mother Briggs you followed home, Hughes. I'll congratulate her on her conquest when I go back."

But Captain Hughes, nettled by loud shouts of laughter, vigorously repudiated such an accusation, and indeed seemed inclined to treat the matter with some slight display of temper, when the harmless Jones, who had been cooling his face by looking out of the window, changed the subject for another almost equally congenial to his comrades.

"Blessed if there isn't Snipe dismounting at the gate!" he exclaimed joyfully; "there's a drummer holding his nag. What a spicy chestnut it is! Holloa, Snipy! come in, won't you, and have a B. and S.?"

A voice was heard to reply in the affirmative; and before the B. and S.—signifying a beaker of brandy and soda-water—could make its appearance, Mr. Snipe walked into the room, and sat himself down amongst the officers with some little shamefacedness, which he strove to conceal by squaring his elbows, pulling down his shirt-cuffs, and coaxing a luxuriant crop of brown whiskers under his chin. Mr. Snipe was one of those enterprising individuals who make a livelihood by riding steeplechases, and are yet supposed by a pious fiction never to receive money for thus exerting their energies and risking their necks. Concerning Mr. Snipe's antecedents, the officers of the 250th were pleasantly ignorant. He had rented a farm, and failed. Had gone into business as a horse-dealer, and failed. Had been appointed to the Militia, but somehow never joined his corps. Had been, ostensibly, in all the good things of the Turf for the last three years; yet seemed to be none the richer, and none the less hungry for a chance. Had been even taken into partnership by a large cattle-dealer, when at his lowest ebb, and bought out of the concern by his confiding principal before three months expired. Mr. Snipe always said he was too sharp for the business, and, I believe, his partner thought so too. Since then he had been riding at all weights, over all courses, wherever horses were pitted against each other to gallop and jump, or to be pulled and fall, as the case might be, and the trainers' orders might direct. Mr. Snipe had figured in France, in Germany, in Belgium, and once on a thrice auspicious occasion had been within a stirrup leather's thickness of winning the Liverpool; that is

"Booby by Idle Boy."

to say, but for its breaking, he couldn't have lost! He seemed in easy circumstances for a considerable period after this misfortune, smoked the best of cigars, and drank a pint of sherry every day between luncheon and dinner-time.

This gentleman was a wiry, well-built, athletic man, somewhat below the middle size, but extremely strong for his weight. He could shoot, play rackets, whist, and cricket better than most people, and was a consummate horseman on any animal under any circumstances. His countenance, though good-looking, was not prepossessing; and his manners argued want of confidence, not so much in his impudence as in his social standing. What he might have been among ladies I am not prepared to say, but he seemed awkward and ill at ease even before such indulgent critics as the officers of the 250th Foot.

He carried it off, however, with a certain assumption of bravado, and entered the messroom with that peculiar gait —half-limp, half-swagger—which it is impossible for any man to accomplish who does not spend the greatest part of his life in the saddle. Captain Hughes, as possessing an animal of his own in training, treated him with considerable deference; while the younger officers, including Jones, gazed on him with an admiration almost sublime in its intensity.

"How's the horse?" said this worthy, addressing himself at once to the captain, without taking any more notice of his entertainers than a downcast, circular, half-bow to be divided amongst them; "how's Booby by Idle-Boy? You haven't scratched him, have ye, at the last minute? I tell ye, he'll carry all the money to-morrow; and he ought to be near winning too—see if he won't!"

"The horse is doing good work," answered Hughes, delighted to be thus recognised in his double capacity of sportsman and dandy before all his young admirers. "I make no secrets about him. He galloped this morning with Fleur-de-Lys, and he will run to-morrow strictly on the square."

Mr. Snipe shot a glance from his keen eye in the speaker's face, and looked down at his own boots again directly.

"Of course! of course!" he repeated; "and you can't get more than two to one about him, neither here nor in town. Who's to ride him, captain? I suppose you couldn't get up at the weight?"

"Impossible," answered Hughes complacently, and trying to look as if he had ever dreamt of such a thing. "My brother-officer, Mr. Ainslie, has promised to steer him for

me to-morrow; and I agree with you we have a very fair chance of winning."

Gerard, thus distinguished, came forward from the fire-place, and observed modestly—

"I'll do my best; but you know, Hughes, I have never ridden a hurdle-race in my life."

Mr. Snipe's little red betting-book was half-way out of his pocket, but at this candid avowal he thrust it back again unopened. His quick eye had taken in Gerard's active figure and frank, fearless face, without seeming to be lifted from the ground; and he knew how dangerous, on a good horse, was an inexperienced performer, who would go away in front. On second thoughts, however, he drew it out once more; and taking a pull at his brandy and soda, asked in a very business-like tone—

"What will anybody lay me against Lothario? I'll take six to one he's placed. First, second, or third—1, 2, 3, or a win. Come! he's as slow as a mile-stone, but he can stay for a week. I'll take five if I ride him myself!"

Then began a hubbub of voices, a production of betting-books, and a confusion of tongues, in the midst of which Gerard made his escape to his own lodgings, and rushed to the table whereon he was accustomed to find his letters. Something like a pang of real physical pain shot through him to see it bare, and for one moment he felt bitterly angry in his disappointment. Then next came a rush of contending feelings—love, humiliation, mistrust, despondency, and a morbid, unworthy desire that she, too, might learn what it was to suffer the pain she had chosen to inflict. Then his pride rose to the rescue, and he resolved to leave off caring for anything, take life as it came, and enjoy the material pleasures of the present, unburdened by thought for the future, still less (and again the pain shot through him) haunted by memories of the past. Altogether he was in a likely frame of mind, when fairly mounted on Booby by Idle-Boy, to make the pace very good before he was caught.

CHAPTER XIV

WEARING THE GREEN

THE humours and events of a remote country race-course would be interesting, I imagine, only to the most sporting readers; and for such there is an ample supply provided in a periodical literature exclusively devoted to those amusements or pursuits which many people make the chief business of life.

It is unnecessary, therefore, to dwell upon the various incidents of such a gathering: the feeble bustle at the railway station, the spurious excitement promoted by early beer at the hotel, the general stagnation in the streets, or the dreary appearance of that thinly-sprinkled meadow, which on all other days in the year was called the Cow-pasture, but on this occasion was entitled the Racecourse. Let us rather take a peep at the horses themselves as they are walked to and fro in a railed-off space, behind a rough wooden edifice doing duty for a stand, and judge with our own eyes of their claims to success.

There are four about to start for the hurdle-race, and two of these, Tom-tit and The Conspirator, are so swaddled up in clothing that nothing of them is to be detected save some doubtful legs and two long square tails. Their riders are drinking sherry, with very pale faces, preparatory to weighing in; and it is remarkable that their noses borrow more colour from the generous fluid than their cheeks. Notwithstanding so reassuring an employment, they have little confidence in themselves or their horses. They do not expect to win, and are not likely to be disappointed; for having heard great things of Booby by Idle-Boy, and entertaining besides misgivings that Mr. Snipe would hardly have brought Lothario all this distance for nothing, it has dawned upon them that they had better have saved their entrance-money. Besides, they have even now seen some work-people putting up the hurdles, and they wish they were well out of it altogether.

Mr. Snipe, on the contrary, clad in a knowing great-coat, with goloshes over his neat racing boots, and a heavy straight whip under his arm, walks into the enclosure, accompanied by a friend as sharp-looking as himself, with his usual downcast glances and equestrian shamble, but with a confidence in his own powers that it requires no sherry to fortify nor to create. He superintends carefully the saddling and bridling of Lothario, an attention the animal acknowledges by laid-back ears and a well-directed attempt to kick his jockey in the stomach. Mr. Snipe grins playfully. "If you was only as fond of me as I am of you!" says he, between his teeth; and taking his friend's arm, whispers in his ear. The friend—who looks like a gambling-house keeper out of employment—disappears, losing himself with marvellous rapidity in the crowd beneath the stand.

And now Gerard, clad in boots and breeches of considerable pretension, and attired in a green silk jacket and white cap—the colours of Captain Hughes—emerges from the weighing-shed, where he has first pulled down the indispensable twelve stone; and surrounded by admiring brother-officers, walks daintily towards his horse. The young man's eye is bright, and the colour stands in his cheek. He means to win if he can, and is not the least nervous. Captain Hughes, who thinks it looks correct to be on extremely confidential terms, remains assiduously at his elbow, and whispers instructions in his ear from time to time, as he has seen great noblemen at Ascot do by some celebrated jockey. "Don't disappoint the horse, Gerard," says he one minute; "Perhaps you'd better wait on Lothario, and come when you see Snipe begin," the next; with various other directions of a contradictory nature, to each of which Gerard contents himself by answering, "All right!" meaning religiously to do his very best for the race.

But if the rider's nerves are unshaken by the prospect of a struggle for victory, as much cannot be said for the horse.

Booby by Idle-Boy is not quite thoroughbred, but has, nevertheless, been put through so severe a preparation that it might have served to disgust an Eclipse. In the language of the stable, he has been "trained to fiddle-strings"; and neither courage nor temper are the better for the ordeal. His skin looks smooth, but his flanks are hollow; his eye is excited, his ears are restless; he champs and churns at his bridle till the foam stands thickly on the bit; he winces at the slightest movement, and betrays altogether an irritable

desire to be off, and get the whole thing over, that argues ill for success.

Mr. Snipe sitting at his ease on Lothario, watches his adversary, swung by a soldier-servant into the saddle.

"I'm blessed if the young 'un isn't a workman!" he mutters, while he marks Gerard's easy seat, and the light touch with which one hand fingers the rein, while the other wanders caressingly over the horse's neck; but his quick eye has already marked that the Booby's curb-chain is somewhat tight, and sidling up just out of kicking distance, Mr. Snipe renews his offer to take five to one about "his own brute," observing that "it is a sporting bet, for he does not really believe Lothario has the ghost of a chance!"

Gerard declines, however; alleging that he is only there to ride, and knows nothing about the merits of the horses, while he turns Booby out of the enclosure, and sends him for a "spin" down the course, followed by the others, with the exception of Mr. Snipe, who contents himself with a mild shuffling little apology for a trot, that by no means enhances Lothario's character amongst the spectators.

They are much more pleased with the Booby by Idle-Boy, who goes raking down the meadow, tossing his head, reaching wildly at his bridle, and giving the rider a great deal of unnecessary trouble to stay and keep his horse in the right place. Gerard handles him with great skill, and pulling up opposite the stand, receives yet further instructions from Captain Hughes, who has already got his glasses out of their case.

"Don't disappoint him, Gerard!" he reiterates loudly, looking round the while for the applause he considers his due. "Make the pace as good as you can! Come away with him in front, and win as you like!"

Mr. Snipe here telegraphs a nod to his friend under the stand, and that speculator, after a few hurried words with a respectable farmer and an officer of the 250th, takes a pencil from his mouth and writes something down in a little red book.

The starter, a neighbouring master of harriers, already brandishes a flag in his hand. Let us go up into the stand, and witness the race from that convenient vantage-ground.

A very well-dressed woman, with a black veil over her face so thickly doubled as to serve for a mask, is looking on with considerable interest, and whispering an observation from time to time in the ear of her cavalier—a close-shaven

man, with a prominent red nose. She is evidently nervous, and crushes into illegible creases the printed card she holds in her hand. Mr. Bruff, on the contrary—for it is that celebrated actor who has taken on himself the pleasing task of attending Fanny Draper to the races—is minutely observant of the demeanour affected by those who ride. His manager meditates bringing out a piece of his own writing, under the title of "Fickle Fortune; or, the Gentleman Jockey," and Mr. Bruff cannot suffer such an opportunity as the present to go by unimproved. Every turn of Mr. Snipe's body, every inflection of his somewhat unpleasant voice, is a lesson for the actor in the leading character he hopes hereafter to assume.

Fanny gazes at Gerard with all her eyes. There is something very romantic and captivating to her ill-regulated mind in the terms on which they stand. She is concerned in an intrigue of which he is the principal object; she is living, unknown to him, in the same house; she is watching his actions, and, above all, his correspondence, every hour of the day; and she is doing her best and wickedest to detach him from the woman he loves. There is a horrible fascination in all this, no doubt; and then, how well he looks in his silk jacket!

"He's a handsome fellow, too, isn't he, that one in green?" she whispers to Mr. Bruff. "I hope he'll win, I'm sure—and I think he must!"

"He's well made-up," answers her companion absently; "but he don't look the part like the quiet one. I see how it's done! A meaning expression throughout; a glance that nothing escapes; a flash at intervals, but the general tone very much kept down. It's original business. It's striking out a new line altogether. I think it ought to suit me!"

Fanny turns very pale.

"Bother!" says she. "They're off!"

So they are. After several false starts, occasioned I am bound to admit by the perverseness of Mr. Snipe, and which nearly drive the Booby mad, while they elicit much bad language and a threat of complaint to the Stewards from the master of harriers, who is accustomed to have things his own way, the four horses get off, and bound lightly over the first flight of hurdles, with no more interesting result than that Conspirator nearly unships his rider, and the jockey of Tom-tit loses his cap. Then, keeping pretty close together, they come round the far-end of the meadow at a pace more than usually merry for the commencement of a race, due to the

"The struggle is between Lothario and the booby."

violence of the Booby, increased by Lothario's proximity at his quarters.

And now they reach the second leap. Tom-tit, following the others, jumps it like a deer, but his jockey tumbles off, and lies for a moment motionless, as if he was hurt.

Fanny begins to think it dangerous, and averts her eyes.

"Is green still leading?" she asks in a faint voice.

"Green still leading!" echoes Mr. Bruff; but he is thinking less of the sport than of a peculiar twist in Mr. Snipe's features as he inspected the saddling of his horse before the start.

And now Conspirator is also out of the race, and the struggle is between Lothario and the Booby as they approach the last flight of hurdles. Fanny cannot resist raising her head to look, but she is horribly frightened. Gerard gathers his horse very skilfully for the effort, but the Booby, besides being fractious, is also blown. Mr. Snipe, too, on Lothario, has now come alongside, and without actually jostling him, edges his own horse, who is in perfect command, near enough to his adversary's to discompose him very much in his take-off. The Booby, giving his head a frantic shake, sticks his nose in the air and refuses to be pacified. Gerard is only aware that his horse is out of his hand, that the animal has disappeared somehow between his rider's legs, that a green wall of turf rises, perpendicularly to his face, that nose, mouth, and eyes are filled with a sweet, yet acrid fluid, and that he is swallowed up alive in a heaving, rolling, earthy, and tenacious embrace.

What Fanny saw was a shower of splintered wood flying into the air, a horse's belly and girths, with four kicking legs striking convulsively upward, and a green jacket motionless on the sward, shut in ere she could breathe by a swarm of dark, shifting figures, increasing in an instant to a crowd.

She was not afraid now.

"Mr. Bruff!" exclaimed the girl, clutching his arm as in a vice, and turning on him a white face and a pair of shining eyes that scared even the actor, "bring the fly down there—quick! He mustn't lie on the damp earth. Don't stop me! Before I get to him he might"—

She choked, without finishing her sentence, but she was out of the stand like a lapwing, while Mr. Bruff, with almost equal alacrity, went to fetch the fly.

He could not but observe, however, that Mr. Snipe, returning to weigh after an easy victory, nodded his head to his

confederate with a gesture that was worth rounds of applause. He overheard, too, a remark that accompanied the action—

"You may bid them a hundred-and-fifty for the Booby, if you can't get him for less. He'd have landed it if he'd been properly ridden, I'll lay two to one!"

CHAPTER XV

THE WHITE WITCH

IT was a pity, said half the county, that Mr. Vandeleur "gave so little" at Oakover. Never was a place more adapted for out-of-door gatherings, having for their object the wearing of becoming dresses and the general discomfiture of the male sex. There were walks within half a mile of the house, along which it was impossible to stroll in safety with a fair companion under a summer sun. There were pheasant-houses to go and see, standing apart in convenient nooks and shaded recesses. There was a little lake, and on its surface floated a little skiff calculated to hold only two people at a time. Above all, there was the spring of ice-cold water under the hill in the deer-park, that was obviously a special provision of nature for the promotion of picnics.

It is one of the last fine days of a summer that has lingered on into the early autumn. The blue sky is laced with strips of motionless white cloud. The sward is burnished and slippery with long-continued drought. Not a blade of arid grass, not a leaf of feathery, yellowing fern stirs in the warm, still, sunny atmosphere. Gigantic elms stand out in masses of foliage almost black with the luxuriance of a prime that is just upon the turn; and from their fastnesses the wood-pigeon pours its drowsy plaint—now far, now near, in all its repetitions suggestive still of touching memories, not unpleasing languor, and melancholy repose. The deer have retired to the farthest extremity of their haunts, scared, it would seem, by the white legs of two Oakover footmen, moving under an old elm, unpacking sundry hampers, and laying a large tablecloth on the grass beneath its shade. Vandeleur understands comfort, and with him a picnic simply means the best possible cold dinner that can be provided by a French cook, laid out by servants well drilled in all the minute observances of a great house. To-day he has a gathering of his neighbours for the express purpose of eating and drinking in the deer-park instead of the dining-

room. He is coming up the hill now, walking slowly with a lady on his arm, and followed by a pony-carriage, a barouche, and his own mail-phaeton, all freighted with guests who prefer a drive to a half-mile walk on so broiling a day. The lady who has taken her host's arm for the short ascent at the end of their journey is dressed, as usual, in pink. Miss Tregunter has been told by a gentleman now present that no colour suits her so well. Consequently she is pink all over—pink dress, pink bonnet, pink ribbons, pink cheeks.

"'Pon my soul!" says Vandeleur, "you look like a picotee! I haven't such a flower in the garden. I wonder whether you'd bear transplanting!"

Miss Tregunter, conscious that such a remark, though it would almost amount to an offer from anybody else, is only "Mr. Vandeleur's way," laughs and blushes, and puts her pretty pink parasol down to hide her pretty pink face. Dolly Egremont, in the pony-carriage with Miss Welby, begins to fidget; and Dandy Burton wishes he had put on the other neckcloth—the violet one. These two young gentlemen have nearly completed the term of their studies with Mr. Archer. Stimulated by Gerard's appointment, and fired with noble emulation, they anticipate the dreaded ordeal of examination next week not without misgivings, yet devoutly hope it may be their luck to scrape through.

Miss Welby looks very pretty, not only in the eyes of her father behind in the barouche—and persuaded but this very morning, with a great deal of coaxing, to join the party—but in the opinion of every other gentleman present; nay, even the ladies, though they protest she is not "their style," cannot but admit that "the girl has some good points about her, and would not be amiss if she didn't look so dreadfully pale, and had a little more colouring in her dress."

Norah does look pale, and quiet as is her costume, it shows more colour than her cheek. Truth to tell, Miss Welby is very unhappy. Day after day she has been expecting an answer from Gerard to her kind, playful, and affectionate letter, but day after day she has been disappointed. Her heart sinks when she reflects that he may be ill—that something dreadful may have happened to him, and she knows nothing about it; worse still, that he may have ceased to care for her, and what is there left then? It galls and shames her to believe that he has used her badly; and were he present, she might have courage to show she was offended; but he is far away, and what is the use of pride or pique? What is the use of anything? It seems such a

mockery to have the homage of everyone else and to miss the only eye from which an admiring glance would be welcome; the only voice from which one word of approval would thrill direct to her heart.

She has selected Dolly for her companion in the pony-carriage because she cherishes some vague idea that Gerard liked him better than the others ; but Dolly is unworthy of his good fortune, having eyes at present only for Miss Tregunter, whom in her pink dress this young gentleman considers perfectly irresistible.

The rest of the party are paired off rather by chance than inclination. Dandy Burton has found himself placed side by side with Lady Baker, and feels thankful that their short drive will so soon be over, and he can select a more congenial companion for the rest of the afternoon.

Vandeleur, a thorough man of the world, and when once started quite in his element on these occasions, believes that he has now paid sufficient attention to Miss Tregunter, who, being an heiress, is supposed to exact a little more homage than worse portioned damsels, and seeks for the face that has begun to haunt him strangely of late—in his business, in his pleasures, in his solitary walks, even in his dreams. That face looks pale, unhappy, and a little bored, so the Squire of Oakover resolves to bide his time. He has played the game too often not to know its niceties, and he is well aware that if a woman feels wearied while in a man's society, she unreasonably connects the weariness ever afterwards with the companion, rather than the cause. In the two or three glances he steals at her, she seems to him lovelier, more interesting, more bewitching than ever. Happiness is to most faces a wonderful beautifier; but there are people who look their best when they are wretched ; and Norah Welby is one of them.

Vandeleur turns away to his other guests with a strange gnawing pain at his heart, that he never expected to feel again. It reminds him of the old times, twenty years ago; and he laughs bitterly to think that wicked, and worn, and weary as he is, there should still be room in his evil breast for the sorrow that aches, and rankles, and festers, that according to a man's nature exalts him to the highest standard of good, or sinks him to the lowest degradation of evil. Twenty years ago, too, he knows he was better than he is now. Twenty years ago he might have sacrificed his own feelings to the happiness of a woman he loved. But life is short ; it is too late for such childishness now.

"Burton, take off those smart gloves, and cut into the pie. Miss Tregunter, come a little more this way, and you will be out of the sun. Lady Baker, I ordered that shawl expressly for you to sit upon. Never mind the salad, Welby, they'll mix it behind the scenes. Champagne—yes! There's claret-cup and Badminton, if you like it better. Mr. Egremont, I hope you are taking care of Miss Welby."

Dolly, still uneasy about the pink young lady opposite, heaps his neighbour's plate with food, and fills her glass with champagne. Miss Welby looks more bored than ever, and Vandeleur begins to fear his picnic will turn out a failure after all.

The Dandy, seldom to be counted on in an emergency, advances, however, boldy to the rescue. He helps everybody round him to meat and drink. He compliments Miss Tregunter on her dress; Miss Welby, who eats nothing, on her appetite; and Lady Baker, who drinks a good deal, on her brooch. Then it is discovered that he can spin forks on a champagne-cork; and by degrees people begin to get sociable, glasses are emptied, tongues loosened, and the deer, feeding half a mile off, raise their heads in astonishment at the babble of the human voice.

Presently somebody wants to smoke. It is not exactly clear with whom this audacious proposal originates, but Dandy Burton declares stoutly in favour of the movement. Lady Baker, whom everyone seems tacitly to suspect as a dissentient, has no objection, provided her glass is once more filled with champagne. She even hazards an opinion that it will keep off the flies. Miss Tregunter would like to smoke too, only she knows it would make her head ache, and fears it might have results even more unpleasant than pain. By the time the cigars are well under way, silence seems to have settled once more upon the party, but it is the silence of repose and contentment, rather than of shyness and constraint.

Miss Welby, awaking from a profound fit of abstraction, asks in a tone of injured feeling, "Why does nobody sing a song?"

"Why, indeed?" says Vandeleur. "If I had ever done such a thing in my life, I would now. Miss Tregunter, I know you can pipe more sweetly than the nightingale—won't you strike up?"

"No, I won't strike up, as you call it," answered Miss Tregunter, laughing; "my poor little pipe would be lost in this wilderness. Nothing but a man's voice will go down in the open air. Mr. Burton, I call upon you to begin."

But the Dandy could not sing without his music, nor, indeed, was he a very efficient performer at any time, although he could get through one or two pieces creditably enough in a room, with somebody who understood his voice to play the accompaniment, and everything else in his favour. He excused himself, therefore, looking imploringly at Dolly the while.

Miss Tregunter followed his glance. "You'll sing, I'm sure, Mr. Egremont," she said, rather affectionately. "I know you can, for everybody says so; and it seems so odd that I should never have heard you!"

Dolly, like all stout men, had a voice. Like all stout men, too, he was thoroughly good-natured; so he would probably have complied at anyrate, but there was no resisting such an appeal, from such a quarter. He looked admiringly in the young lady's face.

"Willingly," said he. "What shall I sing?"

"'Rule Britannia,'" observed Norah listlessly, and with a curl of her lip, sufficiently ungrateful to the willing performer.

"No, no!" protested Miss Tregunter. "How can you, dear?"

"Well, 'God Save the Queen,' then," suggested Miss Welby, who was obviously not in a good humour.

"That always comes at the finish," said Burton. "Don't be sat upon, Dolly. Put your other pipe out, and sing us the 'White Witch.'"

"Why the 'White Witch'?" asked Vandeleur. "It sounds a queer name. What does it mean?"

"It don't mean anything," answered Dolly. "It's a song Gerard brought down from London before he went away. He was always humming it—very much out of tune. He said it reminded him of somebody he knew. Very likely his grandmother!"

Norah Welby blushed scarlet, and then turned pale. Nobody observed her but Vandeleur; and his own brow darkened a good deal. "Let us have it by all means," he said, with admirable self-command, at the same time stretching forward to fill his glass, and thus screening Miss Welby from observation.

Dolly now struck up in a full mellow voice—

"Have a care! She is fair,
The White Witch there,
In her crystal cave, up a jewelled stair.
She has spells for the living would waken the dead,
And they lurk in the line of her lip so red,
And they lurk in the turn of her delicate head,
And the golden gleam on her hair.

"Forbear! Have a care
Of her beauty so rare,
Of the pale proud face, and the queen-like air,
And the love-lighted glances that deepen and shine,
And the coil of bright tresses that glisten and twine,
And the whispers that madden—like kisses, or wine.
Too late! Too late to beware.

"Never heed! Never spare!
Never fear! Never care!
It is better to love, it is bolder to dare.
Lonely and longing and looking for you,
She has woven the meshes you cannot break through,
She has taken your heart, you may follow it too.
Up the jewelled stair, good luck to you there!
In the crystal cave, with the witch so fair,
The White Witch fond and fair."

"A bad imitation of Tennyson," remarked Vandeleur. "But well sung, Mr. Egremont, for all that. I am sure we are very much obliged to you."

"I know I am," said Miss Tregunter; at which Dolly looked extremely gratified. "I am glad I have heard you sing, and I should like to hear you again."

"It's certainly pretty!" affirmed Lady Baker drowsily. "What is it all about?"

Norah's eyes looked very deep and dark, shining out of her pale face. "I should like to have that song," said she in a low voice. "Mr. Egremont, will you copy it out, and send it me?"

Vandeleur flung the end of his cigar away with a gesture of impatience, even of irritation. "Poor Ainslie!" said he in a marked tone! "I wish he hadn't left Archer's quite so soon."

"Have you heard anything of him?" asked Dolly eagerly. "The place hasn't been the same since he went away. A better chap never stepped than Ainslie. I'm sure I wish he was back again."

Alas! that on this young gentleman's preoccupied heart the kindly glance that Norah now vouchsafed him should have been so completely thrown away!

"I've heard no good of him," answered Vandeleur gravely. "Young fellows are all wild; and I'm the last man to object, but our friend has been doing the thing a little too unscrupulously, and I, for one, am very sorry for it."

"He always wanted knowledge of the world," observed Burton in a tone of considerable self-satisfaction. "I knew he would come to grief, if they let him run alone too soon."

"I'll swear he's never done anything really wrong or dishonourable!" protested Dolly in a great heat and fuss, which

surrounded him as with a glory in the eyes of Miss Welby. "I believe Gerard Ainslie to be the most perfect gentleman in the world!"

"I believe you to be the most perfectly good-natured fellow I know," answered Vandeleur, laughing. "Come, it's cooler now; shall we take a stroll in the park? By the bye, Miss Welby, I haven't forgotten my promise to show you the Rock House."

Miss Welby's proud pale face grew prouder and paler as she bowed assent, and walked off with her host in the direction indicated. Vexed, wounded, and justly irritated, she could not yet resist the temptation of trying to learn something definite concerning Gerard Ainslie.

CHAPTER XVI

PIOUS ÆNEAS

"I'M bored about a friend of ours, Miss Welby," observed Vandeleur, preceding his guest along a narrow path through the fern, out of hearing by the others, and careful not to look back in her face. "This way, and mind those brambles don't catch in your pretty dress. It isn't often I allow anything to vex me, but I am vexed with young Ainslie. I thought him such a nice, straightforward, well-disposed boy, and above all, a thorough gentleman. It only shows how one can be deceived."

She felt her cheek turn white and her heart stand still, but her courage rose at the implied imputation, and she answered boldly: "Whatever may be Mr. Ainslie's faults, he is the last person in the world I should suspect of anything false or ungentlemanlike."

"Exactly what I have said all along," assented Vandeleur; "and even now I can scarcely bring myself to believe in the mischief I hear about him, though I grieve to say I have my information from the best authority."

She stopped short, and he turned to look at her. Vandeleur had often admired a certain dignity and even haughtiness of bearing which was natural to Norah. He had never seen her look so queen-like and defiant as now.

"Why don't you speak out, Mr. Vandeleur?" she said somewhat contemptuously; "I am not ashamed to own that I do take an interest in Mr. Ainslie. It would be strange if I did not, considering that he is a great friend of papa's as well as mine. If you know anything about him, why don't you proclaim it at once?"

He dropped his voice and came closer to her side.

"Shall I tell you why I don't?" said he tenderly.

"Because I'm soft; because I'm stupid; because I'm an old fool. Miss Welby, I would rather cut my right hand off than give you a moment's pain; and I know your heart is so kind and good that it would pain you to hear what I have learned about Gerard Ainslie."

"You have no right to say so!" she burst out vehemently, but checked herself on the instant. "I mean you cannot suppose that it would pain me more than any of his other friends to hear that he was doing badly. Of course, I should be very sorry," she added, trying to control her voice, which shook provokingly. "Oh, Mr. Vandeleur! after all, he's very young, and he's got nobody to advise him. Can't you help him? Can't you do something? What is the matter? What has he really been about?"

"I scarcely know how to tell you," he answered, shaking his head with an admirable assumption of consideration and forbearance. "There are certain scrapes out of which a young fellow may be pulled, however deeply he is immersed, if he will only take advice. I've been in hundreds of them myself. But this is a different business altogether. I've gone through the whole thing, Miss Welby. Heaven forbid you should ever learn one-tenth of the sorrows and the troubles and the evils that beset a man's entrance on life. I have bought my experience dearly enough;—with money, with anxiety, with years of penitence and remorse. People will tell you that John Vandeleur has done everything, and been through everything, and got tired of everything. People will tell you a great deal about John Vandeleur that isn't true. Sometimes I wish it was! Sometimes I wish I could be the hard, heartless, impenetrable old reprobate they make me out. However, that's got nothing to do with it. All I can say is, that even with my experience of evil I don't know what to advise."

"Is it money?" she asked; but her very lips were white, and her voice sank to a whisper.

"Far worse than that!" he exclaimed. "If it had been only an affair of extravagance, it would never have come to your ears, you may be sure! After all, I like the lad immensely, and I would have persuaded him to allow me to arrange anything of that kind in ten minutes. No, Miss Welby, it is not money; and not being money, can you guess what it is?"

Of course she could guess! Of course she had guessed long ago! Of course the jealousy inseparable from love had given her many a painful twinge during the last half-hour;

and equally, of course, she affected innocence, ignorance, profound indifference, and answered never a word.

He looked designedly away, and she was grateful for his forbearance.

"Not being money," he continued, "we all know it must be love. And yet I cannot call this unaccountable, this incomprehensible infatuation by so exalted a name. I tell you the whole thing beats me from beginning to end. Here was a young man with every advantage of education and standing and society, thrown amongst the nicest people in the neighbourhood, visiting at several of our houses, and popular with us all;—a young man who, if he was like young men in general, ought to have been doubly and triply guarded against anything in the shape of folly or vice; who should have been under an influence the most likely to keep him pure, stainless, and unselfish; an influence that preserves almost all others, even old sinners like myself, from the very inclination to evil. And on the threshold of life he casts away every advantage; he sets propriety at defiance; he outrages the common decencies of the world, and he hampers himself with— Miss Welby, I ought not to go on—I ought never to have begun. This is a subject on which it is hardly fit for you and me to converse. See how well the house comes in from here; and give me your advice about taking out that dwarfed oak; it hides more than half the conservatory."

She could see neither dwarfed oak nor conservatory, for her eyes were beginning to cloud with tears, bravely and fiercely kept back. But she had not reached the ordeal thus designedly to shrink from it at last; and though she spoke very fast, every syllable was clear and distinct while she urged him to proceed.

"Tell me the whole truth, Mr. Vandeleur, and nothing but the truth. I have a right to ask you. I have a right to know everything."

So pale, so resolute, and so delicately beautiful! For a moment his heart smote him hard. For a moment he could have spared her, and loved her well enough to make her happy, but even in his admiration his lower nature, never kept down for years, gained the mastery, and he resolved that for her very perfection she must be his own. Again he turned his head away and walked on in front.

"I will tell you the truth," he said, with a world of sympathy and kindness in his voice. "Ainslie has been worse than foolish. He has been utterly dishonourable and unprincipled. He has taken a young girl of this neighbour-

hood away from her home. They are together at this moment. You know her, Miss Welby. She is old Draper's daughter, at Ripley Mill. Come into the Rock House, and sit down. Is it not delightfully cool? Wait here half a minute, and I will bring you the purest water you ever tasted, from the spring at the foot of those steps."

He was out of sight almost while he spoke, and she leaned her head against the cold slab which formed part of the grotto they had entered, feeling grateful for the physical comfort it afforded to sink into a seat and rest her aching temples even on a stone.

It was over then—all over now! Just as she suspected throughout, and she had been right, after all. Then came the dull sense of relief that in its hopelessness is so much worse to bear than pain; and she could tell herself that she had become resigned, careless, stupefied, and hard as the rock against which she leaned her head. When Vandeleur came back, she looked perfectly tranquil and composed. Impenetrable, perhaps, and haughtier than he had ever seen her, but for all that so calm and self-possessed that she deceived even him. "She cannot have cared so much, after all," thought Vandeleur; "and there is a good chance for me still."

He offered her some water, and she noticed the quaint fashion of the silver cup in his hand.

"What a dear old goblet," she said, spelling out the device that girdled it in ancient characters, almost illegible. "Do you mean to say that you leave it littering about here?"

He smiled meaningly.

"I sent it up on purpose for you to drink from. There is a story about the goblet, and a story about the Rock House. Can you make out the motto?"

"Well, it's not very plain," she answered; "but give me a little time. Yes. I have it—

Spare youth,
Have ruth,
Tell truth.

It sounds like nonsense. What does it mean?"

"It's a love story," replied Vandeleur, sitting down by her side, "and it's about my grandmother. Shall I tell it you?"

She laughed bitterly.

"A love story! That must be ludicrous. And about your grandmamma, Mr. Vandeleur! I suppose, then, it's perfectly proper. Yes. You may go on."

"She wasn't my grandmother then," said Vandeleur;

"on the contrary, she had not long been my grandfather's wife. She was a good deal younger than her husband. Miss Welby, do you think a girl could care for a man twenty years older than herself?"

She was thinking of her false love.

"Why not," she asked, "if he was staunch and true?"

Vandeleur looked pleased, and went on with his story:—

"My grandfather loved his young bride very dearly. It does not follow because there are lines on the forehead and silver streaks in the beard that the heart should have outlived its sympathies, its affections, its capability of self-sacrifice and self-devotion. It sounds ridiculous, I daresay, for people to talk about love when they are past forty, but you young ladies little know, Miss Welby; you little know. However, my grandfather, as old a man as I am now, worshipped the very ground his young wife trod on, and loved her no less passionately, and perhaps more faithfully, than if he had been five-and-twenty. She was proud of his devotion, and she admired his character, or she would not probably have married him; but her heart had been touched by a young cousin in the neighbourhood,—only scratched, I think, not wounded to hurt, you know,—and whatever she indulged in of romance and sentiment, was associated with this boy's curly locks, smooth face, and frivolous, empty character. There is a charm in youth, Miss Welby, I fear, for which truth, honour, station, and the purest affection are no equivalents."

She sighed, and shook her head. Vandeleur proceeded:—

"My grandfather felt he was not appreciated as he deserved, and it cut him to the heart. But he neither endeavoured to force his wife's inclinations nor watched her actions. One day, however, taking shelter from a shower under that yew-tree, he heard his wife and her cousin, who had been driven to the same refuge, conversing on the other side. He was obliged to listen, though every word spoken stabbed him like a knife. It was evident a strong flirtation existed between them. Nothing worse, I am bound to believe; for in whose propriety shall a man have confidence, if not in his grandmother's? Nevertheless, the hidden husband heard his wife tax her cousin with deceiving her, and the young man excused himself on the grounds of his false position as a lover without hope. This was so far satisfactory. 'And if your husband asked you whether you had seen me to-day, what should you answer?' demanded the cousin. 'I should tell him the truth,' replied my grandmother. This was better

still. The next communication was not quite so pleasant for the listener. His wife complained bitterly of the want of shelter in this, the only spot, she said, where they could meet without interruption ; in rain, she protested, they must get drenched to the skin, and in hot weather there was not even a cup to drink out of from the spring. The cousin, on the other hand, regretted loudly that his debts would drive him from the country, that he must start in less than a week, and that if he had but two hundred pounds he would be the happiest man in the world. Altogether it was obvious that the spirits of this interesting couple fell rapidly with their prospects.

"The rain fell too, but my grandfather was one of the first gentlemen of his day, and notwithstanding the ducking he got walked away through the heaviest of it, rather than remain for their leave-taking. We are a wild race, we Vandeleurs, but there is some little good in us if you can only get at it."

"I am sure there is," said she absently ; "and, at least, you have none of you ever failed in loyalty."

"Thank you, Miss Welby," said Vandeleur, now radiant. "*Loyal je serais durant ma vie!* Well, if you can stand any more about my grandmother, I will tell you exactly what happened. It rained for three days without intermission—it sometimes does in this country. During that period an unknown hand paid the cousin's debts, enabling him to remain at home as long as he thought proper ; and on the fourth morning, when the sun shone, my grandmother, taking her usual walk to the spring, found not only her cousin at the accustomed spot, but this Rock House erected to shelter her, and that silver cup ready to drink from, encircled, as you see it, with the motto you have just read. All these little matters were delicate attentions from a husband twenty years older than herself!"

"He must have been a dear old thing!" exclaimed Norah vehemently. "Wasn't she delighted? And didn't she grow awfully fond of him, after all?"

"I don't know," answered Vandeleur very gravely, and in a low voice that trembled a little. "But I am sure if she did *not*, he was a miserable man for his whole life. It is hard to give gold for silver, as many of us do ungrudgingly and by handfuls; but it is harder still to offer hopes, happiness—past, present, future—your existence, your very soul, and find it all in vain, because the only woman on earth for you has wasted her priceless heart on an object she knows to be

unworthy. She gives her gold for silver—nay, for copper; and your diamonds she scorns as dross. Never mind! Fling them down before her just the same! Better that they should be trodden under foot by her, than set in a coronet for the brows of another! Miss Welby—Norah! that is what I call love! An old man's love, and therefore to be ridiculed and despised!"

She had shrunk away now, startled, scared by his vehemence; but he took her hand, and continued very gently, while he drew her imperceptibly towards him—

"Forgive me, Miss Welby—Norah! May I not call you Norah? I have been hurried into a confession that I had resolved not to make for months—nay, for years—perhaps not till too late even for the chance of reaping anything from my temerity. But it cannot be unsaid now. Listen. I have loved you very dearly for long; so dearly that I could have yielded up my hopes without a murmur, had I known your affections gained by one really worthy of you, and could have been content with my own loneliness to see my idol happy. Yes, I love you madly. Do not draw away from me. I will never persecute you. I do not care what becomes of me if I can only be sure that you are contented. Miss Welby! I offer *all*, and I ask for so little in return! Only let me watch over your welfare, only let me contribute to your happiness; and if you can permit me to hope, say so; if not, what does it matter? I shall always love you, and belong to you—like some savage old dog, who only acknowledges one owner—and you may kick me, or caress me, as you please."

She was flattered—how could she be otherwise? And it was a salve to her sore suffering heart to have won so entirely the love of such a man—of this distinguished, well-known, experienced Mr. Vandeleur. As a triumph to her pride, no doubt such a conquest was worth a whole college of juveniles; and yet, soothed pique, gratified vanity, budding ambition—all these are not love, nor are they equivalents for love.

She knew it even at this moment; but it would have been heartless, she thought—ungrateful, unfeeling—to speak harshly of him now. She drew her hand away; but she answered in a low and rather tender voice, with a smile that did not in the least conceal her agitation—

"You are very noble and very generous. I could not have the heart to *kick* you, I am sure!"

"And I may hope?" he exclaimed exultingly. But her face was now hidden, and she was crying in silence.

He was eager for an answer. He had played the game so well, he might consider it fairly won.

"One word, Miss Welby—Norah, my darling Norah! I will wait any time—I will endure any trial—only tell me that it will come at last!"

"Not yet," she whispered—"not yet!"

And with this answer he was fain to content himself, for no further syllable did Miss Welby utter the whole way down the hill, the whole way across the deer-park, the whole way along the half-mile avenue to the house. They reached it like strangers, they entered it at different doors, they mixed with the various guests as if they had not a thought nor an interest in common; yet none the less did Norah Welby feel that, somehow against her will, she was fastened by a long and heavy chain, and that the other end was held by John Vandeleur, Esq., of Oakover.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GIRLS WE LEAVE BEHIND US

MR. BRUFF never sees his fellow-lodger now. If his enthusiasm for the profession impels him to impromptu rehearsals, they must be dependent on the good-nature of old mother Briggs, or the leisure moments, not easily arrested, of the hard-worked H'ann! He is little impressed by female charms; for although, like actors in general, he looks of no particular age, and might be anything between thirty and sixty, Mr. Bruff has acquired that toughness of cuticle, both without and within, which defends the most sensitive of us after our fiftieth birthday; and impassioned as he may appear in the character of a stage lover, to use his own expression, he is "adamant, sir, adamant to the backbone!" in private life. Nevertheless, he considers the young lady he has been in the habit of meeting on the stairs "a very interesting party"; and presiding as he does to-night at a late supper, dramatic and convivial—the forerunner of speedy departure to another provincial theatre—he finds himself thinking more than once of Fanny Draper's well-shaped figure, mobile features, bright eyes, and pleasant saucy smile. He wonders who she is, and what she is. He wonders, with her natural powers of mimicry, with her flexibility of voice and facility of expression, with her advantages of appearance and manner, why she does not take to the profession, and appear at once upon the stage. He wonders (in the interval between a facetious toast and a comic song) whether her residence in this dull provincial town is not intimately connected with the presence of that young officer in whose accident she took such obvious interest; whether it is a case of thrilling romance, fit subject for a stock-piece, or of mere vulgar intrigue. He wonders why she has been absent from the theatre; why she has returned him the orders he sent her this very afternoon; why he has not met her in the street or on the stairs; and

while he empties his glass and clears his voice for the comic song, he wonders what she is doing now.

Fanny Draper is dreaming—dreaming broad awake—buried in a deep, high-backed, white-covered armchair, with her eyes fixed on the glowing coals of a fire that she makes up from time to time with noiseless dexterity, stealing anxious glances the while towards the close-drawn curtains of a large old-fashioned bed. It is long past midnight. Not a sound is heard outside in the deserted street, not a sound in the sick-chamber, but the measured ticking of a watch on the chimney-piece. Throughout the room there is every appearance of dangerous illness combated with all the appliances of medical skill and affectionate attention. There are towels baking on a screen within reach of the fire-glow; layers of lint lie neatly packed and folded on squares of oil-skin; long bandages, dexterously rolled and tied, wait only to be uncoiled with a touch; two or three phials, marked in graduated scale, stand on the dressing-table; a kettleful of water is ready to be placed on the hob; and in a far-off corner, escaping from the lowest drawer of the wardrobe, peeps out a tell-tale cloth stained and saturated with blood.

In that close-curtained bed lies Gerard Ainslie hovering between life and death. He has never spoken since they lifted him from under his horse on the racecourse, and brought him home to his lodgings, a crushed, mutilated form, scarcely breathing, and devoid of sight or sense. Mrs. Briggs opines it is "all over with him, poor young man! though while there's life there's hope o' coorse!" and H'ann has been in a chronic state of smuts and tears since the day of the accident. But Fanny constituted herself sick-nurse at once, and the doctor has told her that if the patient recovers it will be less owing to surgical skill than to her affectionate care and self-devotion. He had better have held his tongue. Poor girl! she never broke down till then, but she went and cried in her own room for forty minutes after this outburst of professional approval.

If he recovers! Fanny has only lately learnt how much that little word means to her—how entirely her own welfare depends on the life of this hapless young gentleman, whom she once considered fair game for the enterprise of a coquette, whom she has been paid (how she winces with shame and pain at the remembrance!)—yes, paid to captivate and allure! It was a dangerous game; it was played with edged tools; and not till too late for salve or plaster did the miller's daughter find out that she had cut her own fingers to the

bone. Now all she prizes and loves in the world lies senseless there within those close-drawn curtains; and her wilful heart has ceased beating more than once when, listening for the only sign of life the sufferer displayed, she fancied his breathing had stopped, and all was over.

To-day, however, there seemed to be a slight improvement, though imperceptible, save to the eye of science. The doctor's face (and be sure it was eagerly watched) had looked a shade less solemn, a thought more anxious. He was coming earlier, too, than usual on the morrow. And had he not said once before that any change would be for the better? Surely it is a good omen. For the first time since she has taken possession of that deep armchair by the fire in the sick-chamber, Fanny suffers her thoughts to wander, and her spirit to lose itself in dreams.

She reviews her life since she has been here—the new existence, brightened by the new feeling which has taken possession of her, body and soul. Thanks to Mr. Bruff's kindness, she has been often to the theatre; and according to her natural tendencies, has derived considerable gratification from her visits. In the two or three pieces she has witnessed she can remember every character, almost every line of every part. It seems so foolish, and yet so natural, to identify the hero with Gerard, the heroine with herself. When Mr. Bruff, as Rinaldo, in a black wig, a black belt, a pair of black boots, black moustaches, and enormous black eyebrows, declared his love to Helena, no two people could be more different than that hoarse tragedian and slim, soft-spoken Gerard Ainslie. Yet it seems to her now that she was Helena, and Rinaldo was the young officer. When Bernard, in the *Brigand's Bride*, stuck a lighted candle into a barrel of gunpowder (ingeniously represented by a bushel of dirty flour), and dared his ruffian band, who "quailed," to use his own words, "before their captain's eye," to remain in circle round these combustibles, and thus vindicate the claims of the boldest to the best of the spoil—in this case consisting of the golden-haired Volante, a princess in her own right, incurably in love with Bernard, of whom she was supposed to know nothing but that he had set her father's castle on fire, and carried her off by main force as his captive;—why, I ask, should Fanny Draper have longed to be placed in so false, not to say so perilous a position, if only to be delivered in the same uncomfortable manner by her own ideal of a lawless brigand, carried out in the character of an ensign belonging to a marching regiment, lately joined, and not yet perfect in his drill? Why, indeed! except that Fanny

had fallen in love, and was mistress neither of her thoughts, her feelings, nor her actions.

Had it been otherwise, she feels she might have done good business since she came to this obscure country town. She might have bettered her position, and, for a person of her station, made no small progress up the social ladder, in all honour and honesty. Not only on the stage has she lately witnessed scenes of love-making and courtship.

Fixing her eyes on the gloomy coals, she beholds again a drama in which but very lately she enacted a real and an important part. She is walking down the High Street once more, in a grey silk dress, with a quiet bonnet, and lavender gloves, and a get-up that she is well aware combines the good taste of the lady with the attractions of the coquette. She is overtaken by Captain Hughes, who professes a surprise thus to meet her; the more remarkable that at the close of their last interview something very like a tacit agreement provided for their next to be held in this very spot. He asks leave, demurely enough, to accompany her part of the way during her walk; and when she accords permission, she is somewhat startled to find the captain's usual flow of conversation has completely failed him, and he seems to have discovered something of engrossing interest in the knot that fastens his sash. As the experienced fisherman feels instinctively the rise before he strikes, Fanny is as sure she has hooked her captain as if he was gasping at her feet; and is not the least surprised when he does speak, that his voice comes thick and hoarse like that of a man in liquor, or in love.

He tells her the day is fine, the weather is altered for the better; that there is no parade at the barracks to-morrow; that the depôt is about to change its quarters; that, for himself, he expects his orders to join the service-companies forthwith; and then—he stops, clears his throat, and looks like an idiot!

"It's coming," thinks Miss Draper; but she won't help him, and he has recourse to his sash once more.

At last he gives a great gulp, and asks her to accompany him.

"He has watched her ever since she came. He has admired her from the first. He never saw such a girl before. She is exactly the sort he likes. He wishes he was good enough for her. Many women have thought him good enough for anything; many, he is afraid, good for nothing! What does *she* think? He cannot live without her. It

would break his heart never to see her again. He is going away. Will she accompany him?"

And Fanny, who through all the struggles and agitation of the fish preserves the *sang-froid* of the fisherman, answers demurely that "*she* knows what gentlemen are, and that no power on earth should induce her to accompany any man one step on his journey through life, whatever his attractions might be or her own feelings (for women were very weak, you know), except as his wife."

"As my wife of course!" gasped the captain, prepared to pay the highest price for indulgence of his whim, and meaning, at the moment, honestly enough, what he proposes.

Miss Draper having now got what she wants—a real offer from a real gentleman—considers she has attained a sufficient social triumph, and prepares to back out of the position with as little offence as possible to the self-love of her admirer.

"It might have been once," she says, shaking her head, and shooting a look at him from under her eyelashes, of which she has often calculated the exact power at the same range—"it can never be now; at least, it would have to be a long while first. I won't talk about my own feelings" (Miss Draper always lets her lovers down very easy), "and I'm sure I'll try to spare yours. Good-bye, captain! I shall often think of you; and you and I will always be the best of friends, won't we?"

"Always!" exclaims the captain; and seizing her hand, presses it to his lips.

. . . . . .

At this stage of her reflections the waning fire, on which she gazes, falls in with a crash; but it fails to disturb the invalid; neither is it that sudden noise which causes Miss Draper to start as if she was stung, and turn to the bed with her eyes full of tears, murmuring—

"I couldn't, I couldn't, my darling! and you lying there! Oh, spare him! spare him! If he would only get well—if he would only get well!"

Then she makes up the fire cautiously, so as not to wake him, wondering with a shiver if he will ever wake again, and goes down on her knees by the armchair, burying her face in her hands.

Not for long, though. Already the grey dawn is stealing through the half-closed shutters; already the day has come which the doctor more than hinted would decide his fate.

Hark! what is that? A strain of music, borne on the chill morning breeze even to the watcher's ears. She frowns impatiently, and, moving swiftly to the window, closes the shutters with a careful hand.

"Beasts! they might wake him!" she mutters below her breath.

Alas! poor Captain Hughes! Not a twinge of regret does she acknowledge for your departure; not a thought does she waste on yourself and your brother-officers. Not a moment does she linger to listen to its band, though the depôt of the 250th Regiment is marching off for good-and-all to the tune of "The Girls we leave behind us!"

CHAPTER XVIII

FOR BETTER

"HAPPY," says the proverb, "is the wedding that the sun shines on."

This is probably as true as most other proverbs. No doubt the sun shone bright over the park and grounds at Oakover on the morning which was to see John Vandeleur for the second time a bridegroom. Everything, including the old housekeeper fifty years in the family, smiled auspiciously on the event. The lawns had been fresh mown, the gravel rolled smooth, the very flowers in the garden seemed to have summoned the brightest autumn tints they could afford, to do honour to the occasion. The servants of course were in new and gorgeous attire, the men rejoicing in a period of irregular work and unlimited beer, the women jubilant in that savage glee with which our natural enemies celebrate every fresh victory gained over constituted authority. Their very ribbons, dazzling and bran new, quivered with a triumph almost hysterical in its rapture; and from the housekeeper before mentioned, sixty years of age and weighing sixteen stone, to the under-scullery-maid, not yet confirmed, one might have supposed them about to be married to the men of their choice on the spot, one and all. Stock jokes, good wishes, hopeful forebodings, were rife in the household; and John Vandeleur, shaving in his dressing-room, looked from his own worn face in the glass, to the keen edge of his razor, with a grim, unearthly smile.

"Would it not be better," he muttered—"better both for her and for me? What right have I to expect that this venture should succeed when all the others failed? And yet—I don't think I ever cared for any of them as I do for this girl—except perhaps Margaret—poor, gentle, loving Margaret! and I had to lay her in her grave! No, I could not stand such another 'facer' as that. If I thought I must go through such a day's work again, I'd get out of it all—now, this moment, with a turn of the wrist and a minute's

choke like a fellow gargling for a sore throat! How surprised they'd all be! That ass of a valet of mine, I'll lay two to one he'd strop my razor before he gave the alarm. And those pretty bridesmaids, with their turquoise-lockets! And old Welby—gentlemanlike old fellow, Welby! It wouldn't astonish him so much: he was one of us once. And poor Norah! She'd get over it though, and marry Gerard Ainslie after all. Not if I know it! No, no, my boy! I'm not going to throw the game into your hands like that! If I was but fifteen years younger, or even ten, I'd hold my own with any of you! Ah, there was a time when John Vandeleur could run most of you at even weights for the Ladies' Plate; and now, I don't believe she half cares for me! While I—blast me for an old fool!—I love the very gloves she wears! There's one of them in that drawer now! She might do what she liked with me. I could be a better man with her—I know I've got it in me. How happy we might be together! Haven't I everything in the world women like to possess? And what sort of a use have I made of my advantages? I've had a deal of fun, to be sure; but hang me if I'd do the same again! I should like to turn over a new leaf on my wedding-morning. Some fellows would go down on their knees and pray. I wish I could!"

Why didn't he? why couldn't he? It would have been his only chance, and he let it slip. He finished dressing instead, and went downstairs to inspect the preparations for his bride's welcome when she came home. Except when he swore at the groom of the chambers about some flower-vases, the servants thought he was in high good-humour; and the upper-housemaid—a tall person of experience, who had refused several offers—considered him not a day too old for a bridegroom.

The wedding was to take place at Marston, and the breakfast to be given in the Rectory by the bride's father, who was to officiate at the altar, and offer up his daughter like a second Agamemnon: the simile was his own. Afterwards the happy couple were to proceed at once to Oakover, there to spend their honeymoon and remain during the winter. This last was an arrangement of Vandeleur's, who, having been married before, was alive to the discomfort of a Continental trip for two people whose acquaintance is, after all, none of the most intimate, and to whom the privacy and comfort of a home seem almost indispensable. He had earned his experience, and determined to profit by it. This,

you will observe, young ladies, is one of the advantages of marrying a widower.

It is needless to relate that at the wedding-breakfast were congregated the smartest and best-dressed people of the neighbourhood. Even those who had hitherto disapproved of his goings-on, and kept aloof from his society, were too glad to welcome a man of Mr. Vandeleur's acres and position back into the fold of respectability. There is joy even on earth over a repentant sinner, provided that he leaves off bachelor-ways, opens his house, gives solemn dinners, and breaks out with an occasional ball!

Lady Baker was triumphant. "She had always said there was a deal of good in Vandeleur, that only wanted bringing out. Wild oats, my dear! Well, young men will sow them plentifully, you know; and neither Newmarket nor Paris are what you can call good schools. Poor Sir Philip always said so, and he was a thorough man of the world—a thorough man of the world, my dear; and liked Mr. Vandeleur, what he knew of him, very much. To be sure, they never met but twice. Ah! there was twenty years' difference between him and me, and I daresay there's more between this couple. Well, I always think a wife should be younger than her husband. And she's sweetly pretty, isn't she, Jane? Though I can't say I like the shape of her wreath, and I never saw anybody look so deadly pale in my life."

Thus Lady Baker to her next neighbour at the wedding-breakfast, Miss Tregunter, looking very fresh and wholesome in white and blue, with the sweetest turquoise-locket (Mr. Vandeleur had eight of them made for the eight bridesmaids) that ever rose and fell on the soft bosom of one of these pretty officials unattached. Miss Tregunter, knowing she is in her best looks, has but one regret, that she is not dressed in pink, for she sits next to Dolly Egremont.

This young gentleman is in the highest possible state of health and spirits. He has been up for his examination, and failed to pass; which, however, does not in the least affect his peace of mind, as he entertains no intention of trying again. He and Burton, who has been more fortunate, and is about to be gazetted to a commission in the Household Troops at once, have come to pay their old tutor a visit expressly for the wedding. They consider themselves gentlemen-at-large now, and finished men of the world. Carrying out this idea, they assume an air of proprietorship in their relation with the young ladies of the party, which, though

inexpressibly offensive to its male portion, is tolerated with considerable forbearance, and even approval, by the fairer guests, especially the bridesmaids. That distinguished body has behaved with the greatest steadiness at church, earning unqualified approval from the most competent judges, such as clerk and sexton, by its fixed attention to the Marriage Service, no less than from the fascinating uniformity of its appearance and the perfection of its drill. It is now, to a certain extent, broken up and scattered about; for its duties as a disciplined force are nearly over, and each of its rank-and-file relapses naturally into her normal state of private warfare and individual aggression on the common enemy.

Miss Tregunter, placed between Dolly Egremont and Dandy Burton, with white soup in her plate and champagne in her glass, is a fair specimen of the rest.

"Isn't she lovely?" whispers this young lady, as in duty bound, glancing at the bride, and arranging her napkin carefully over her blue and white draperies.

Dolly steals a look at Norah, sitting pale and stately at the cross-table between her father and her husband. He cannot help thinking of Gerard's favourite song, and that reminds him of Gerard. A twinge takes his honest heart, while he reflects that he would not like to see Miss Tregunter in a wreath of orange-blossoms sitting by anybody but himself; and that perhaps poor Ainslie would be very unhappy if he were here. But this is no time for sadness. Glasses are jingling, plates clattering, servants hurrying about, and tongues wagging with that enforced merriment which is so obvious at all entertainments of a like nature. We gild our wedding-feasts with splendour, we smother them in flowers, and swamp them in wine; yet, somehow, though the Death's head is necessarily a guest at all our banquets, we are never so conscious of his presence as on these special occasions of festivity and rejoicing.

"Wants a little more colour to be perfection," answers cunning Dolly, with a glance into his companion's rosy face. "I don't admire your sickly beauties—'Quenched in the chaste beams of the watery moon; Whitewash I never condescend to spoon.' Ain't I romantic, Miss Tregunter, and poetical?"

"Ain't you a goose!" answers the bridesmaid, laughing. "And I don't believe you know what you do admire!"

"I admire blue and white, with a turquoise-locket," interposes Dandy Burton from the other side. He too entertains

a vague and undefined penchant for Miss Tregunter, who is an heiress.

"Well, you're in luck!" answers the young lady, "for you've eight of us to stare at. Hush! Mr. Welby's going to speak. I hope he won't break down."

Then there is a great deal of knocking of knife-handles on the table, and murmurs of "Hear, hear"; while all the faces turn with one movement, as if pulled by a string, towards Mr. Welby, who is standing up, almost as pale as his daughter, and whose thin hands tremble so that he can scarcely steady them against the fork with which he is scoring marks on the white cloth.

He calls on his guests to fill their glasses. The gentlemen help the ladies with a good deal of simpering on both sides. A coachman acting footman breaks a trifle-dish, and stands aghast at his own awkwardness. But notwithstanding this diversion, everybody's attention is again fastened on poor Mr. Welby, who shakes more and more.

"I have a toast to propose," he says; and everybody repeats, "Hear, hear!" "A toast you will all drink heartily I am sure. There are some subjects on which the dullest man cannot help being eloquent. Some on which the most eloquent must break down. I ought not to be afraid of my own voice. I have heard it once a week for a good many years; but now I cannot say half I mean, and I feel you will expect no long sermon from me to-day. I have just confided to my oldest friend the earthly happiness of my only child. You all know him, and I need not enlarge upon his popularity, his talents, his social successes, and his worth. Why should I tell you my opinion of him? Have I not an hour ago, in the discharge of my sacred office as a priest, and with such blessings as only a father's heart can call down, given him the very apple of mine eye, he light of my lonely home? May she be as precious to him as she has been to me!"

Here Mr. Welby's own voice became very hoarse; and noses were blown at intervals, down each side of the table.

"Of her? What shall I say of her?" His accents were low and broken now, while he only got each sentence out with difficulty, bit by bit. "Why,—that if she proves but half as good a wife to him—as she has been—a daughter to me—he may thank God every night and morning from a full heart, for the happiness of his lot. I call upon you to drink the healths of Mr. and Mrs. Vandeleur."

How all the guests nodded and drank and cheered till the very blossoms shook on the wedding-cake, and their voices failed! Only Dolly forgot to nod or drink or cheer, so eagerly was his attention fixed upon the bride.

Brave Norah never looked at her father, never looked at her husband, never looked up from her plate, nor moved a muscle of her countenance, but sat still and solemn and grave, like a beautiful statue. Only when the speaker's feelings got the better of him large tears welled up slowly, slowly, into her eyes, and dropped one by one on the bouquet that lay in her lap. Dolly could have cried too, for that silent, sad, unearthly quietude seemed to him more piteous, more touching, than any amount of flurry and tears and hysterical laughter and natural agitation.

In talking it over afterwards, people only protested "how beautifully Mr. Vandeleur had behaved!" And no doubt that accomplished gentleman said and did exactly the right thing at the moment and under the circumstances. A felon in the dock is hardly in a more false position than a bridegroom at his own wedding-breakfast. He feels, indeed, very much as if he had stolen something, and everybody knew he was the thief. I appeal to all those who have experienced the trial, whether it does not demand an extreme of tact and courage to avoid masking the prostration and despondency under which a man cannot but labour in such a predicament, by an ill-timed flippancy which everybody in the room feels to be impertinence of the worst possible taste.

Mr. Vandeleur, though he never liked to look a single individual in the face, had no shyness on an occasion like the present. He was well dressed, well got-up, in good spirits, and felt that he had gained at least ten years on old Time to-day. He glanced proudly down on his bride, kindly and respectfully at her father, pleasantly round on the assembled guests; touched frankly and cordially on the goodwill these displayed; alluded feelingly to Mr. Welby's affection for his daughter; neither said too much nor too little about his own sentiments; humbly hoped he might prove worthy of the blessing he should strive hard to deserve; and ended by calling on Dandy Burton, as the youngest man present—or, at all events, the one with the smartest neckcloth—to propose the health of the bridesmaids.

It was a good speech—everybody said so—good feeling, good taste, neither too grave nor too gay. Everybody except Burton, who found himself in an unexpected fix, from which there could be no escape. The Dandy was not shy, but

for the space of at least five minutes he wished himself a hundred miles off. Neither did Miss Tregunter help him in the least. On the contrary, she looked up at him when he rose, with a comic amazement and unfeeling derision in her rosy face, which it was well calculated to express, but which confused him worse and worse.

So he fingered his glass, and shifted from one leg to the other, and hemmed and hawed, and at last got out his desire "to propose the health of the bridesmaids—whose dresses had been the admiration of the beholders; who, one and all, were only second in beauty to the bride; and who had performed their part so well. He was quite sure he expressed the feelings of everyone present in hoping to see them act equally creditably at no distant date on a similar occasion"; and so sat down in a state of intense confusion, under the scowls of the young ladies, the good-natured silence of the gentlemen, and an audible whisper from Miss Tregunter, that "she never heard anybody make such a mess of anything in her life!"

Somebody must return thanks for the bridesmaids; and a whisper creeping round the tables soon rose to a shout of "Mr. Egremont! Mr. Egremont! Go it, Dolly! Speak up! It's all in your line! No quotations!" It brought Dolly to his legs; and he endeavoured to respond with the amount of merriment and facetiousness required. But no; it would not come. That pale face with the slowly dripping tears still haunted him; and whilst he could fix his thoughts on nothing else, he dared not look again in the direction of the bride. He blundered, indeed, through a few of the usual empty phrases and vapid compliments. He identified himself with the bundle of beauty for which he spoke; he only regretted not being a bridesmaid, because if he were, he could never possibly be a bridegroom. He lamented, like a hypocrite, as Miss Tregunter well knew, the difficulty of choosing from so dazzling an assemblage, and concluded by thanking Burton, in the name of the young ladies he represented, for his good wishes on future occasions of a similar nature, but suggested that perhaps if they came to the altar "one at a time, it would last the longer, and might prove a more interesting ceremony to each."

Still Dolly's heart was heavy; and misgivings of evil, such as he had never entertained before, clouded his genial humour, and almost brought the tears to his eyes. Even when the "happy couple" drove off, and he threw an old shoe for luck after their carriage, something seemed to check

his outstretched arm, something seemed to whisper in his ear, that for all the bright sunshine and the smiling sky a dark cloud lowered over the pale proud head of the beautiful bride; and that for Norah Vandeleur ancient customs, kindly superstitions, and good wishes, were all in vain.

CHAPTER XIX

FOR WORSE

MR. BRUFF was a kind-hearted fellow. To their credit be it spoken, actors and actresses, although so familiar with fictitious sorrow and excitement, are of all people the most sensitive to cases of real distress. Many a morning had Mr. Bruff waited anxiously for Mrs. Briggs, to hear her report of the young officer's health; and at last, when that worthy woman informed him, with a radiant face, that the patient was what she called "on the turn," he shook both her hands with such vehemence that she felt persuaded she had made a conquest, and began to reflect on the prudence of marrying again, being well-to-do in the world, and not much past fifty years of age. She had, however, many other matters on her mind just at present. From the time Gerard recovered consciousness, Fanny was never in his room except while he slept, though she continually pervaded the passage, poor girl, with a pale face, and eager, anxious eyes. On Mrs. Briggs, therefore, devolved the nursing of the invalid, a duty she undertook with extreme goodwill and that energy which seldom deserts a woman who is continually cleaning her own house, and tidying up, both above stairs and below.

She wished, though, she had put on a smarter cap, when Mr. Bruff tapped at the door to present his compliments, with kind inquiries, good wishes, and yesterday's paper—not very clean, and tainted by tobacco-smoke, but calculated, nevertheless, to enliven the leisure of an invalid in an armchair.

Gerard was this morning out of bed for the first time. Mrs. Briggs had got him up; had washed, dressed, and would even have shaved him, but that the young chin could well dispense with such attention. No contrast could be much greater than that of the wan, delicate, emaciated invalid by the fire, and the square, black-browed, rough-looking, red-nosed sympathiser in the passage. Mrs. Briggs, with her sleeves tucked up, and apron girded round her waist, kept the

door ajar, and so held converse with the visitor, while she would not permit him to come in.

"To-morrow, Mr. Bruff," said she graciously, "or the day after, according as the doctor thinks well. You've a good heart of your own, though you don't look it! And he thanks you kindly, does my poor young gentleman, for he's dozing beautiful now, and so do I"; slamming the door thereafter in his face, and returning with the newspaper to her charge. "And you may thank Heaven on your knees, my dear," continued the landlady, who liked to improve an occasion, and was never averse to hear herself talk, "as you're sitting alive and upright in that there cheer this blessed day. You may thank Heaven, and the young woman upstairs, as was with you when they brought you in, and never left you, my dear, day and night, till you took your turn, no more nor if she'd been your sister or your sweetheart!"

"What? I've been very bad, have I?" asked Gerard, still a good deal confused, and conscious chiefly of great weakness and a languor not wholly unpleasant.

"Bad!" echoed Mrs. Briggs. "It's death's-door as you've been nigh, my dear, to the very scraper. And when we'd all lost heart, and even Doctor Driver looked as black as night, and shook his head solemn, it was only the young woman upstairs as kep' us up, for we can't spare him, says she, an' we won't, as pale as death, an' as fixed as fate. An' Doctor Driver says, says he, 'If ever a young gentleman was kep' alive by careful nursing, why, my dear, it was your own self, through this last ten days, an' that's the girl as done it!'"

"Where is she?" exclaimed Gerard eagerly, and with a changing colour that showed how weak he was. "I've never thanked her. Can't I see her at once? What a brute she must think me!"

"Patience, my dear," said motherly Mrs. Briggs. "It isn't likely as the young woman would come in now you're so much better, till you was up and dressed. But if you'll promise to take your chicken-broth like a good young gentleman, why I daresay as the young woman will bring it up for you. And I must go and see about it now, this minute, for I dursn't trust H'ann. So you take a look of your paper there, and keep your mind easy, my dear, for you're getting better nicely now; though it's good food and good nursing as you require, and good food and good nursing I'll take care as you get."

So Mrs. Briggs scuttled off to her own especial department below-stairs, pleased with the notion that a touching

little romance was going on in her humble dwelling, fostered by the combined influences of convalescence, contiguity, and chicken-broth. She felt favourably disposed towards her invalid, towards his nurse, towards Mr. Bruff, towards the world in general,—even towards the negligent and constantly erring H'ann.

Gerard, left alone, tried, of course, to walk across the room, and was surprised to find that he could not so much as stand without holding by the table. Even after so trifling an exertion he was glad to return to his chair, and sank back to read his newspaper, with a sigh of extreme contentment and repose.

Its columns seemed to recall at once that world which had so nearly slipped away. He skipped the leading article, indeed, but would probably have missed it had he been in high health, and proceeded to those lighter subjects which it required little mental effort to master or comprehend. He read a couple of police reports and a divorce case; learned that a scientific gentleman had propounded a new theory about aërolites; and tried to realise a distressing accident (nine lives lost) on the Mersey. Then he rested a little, plunged into a more comfortable attitude, and turned the sheet for a look at the other side.

There was half a column of births, deaths, and marriages, and he was languidly pitying Felix Bunney, Esq., of The Warren, whose lady had produced twins, when casting his eye a little lower down, he read the following announcement:—"On the — instant, at Marston Rectory, ——shire, by the Reverend William Welby, father of the bride, Leonora, only daughter of the above, to John Vandeleur, Esq., of Oakover, in the same county, and —— Square, London, S.W." His head swam. That was bodily weakness, of course! But though the printed letters danced up and down the paper, he made an effort, and read it over carefully, word by word, once more. His first feeling, strange to say, was of astonishment that he could bear the blow so well; that he was not stunned, prostrated, driven mad outright! Perhaps his very weakness was in his favour; perhaps the extreme bodily lassitude to which he was reduced deprived him of the power to suffer intensely, and the poor bruised reed bent under a blast that would have crushed some thriving standard plant cruelly to the earth. He realised the whole scene of the wedding, though its figures wavered before his eyes like a dream. He could see the grave father and priest in his long, sweeping vesture; the manly, confident face of Mr.

Vandeleur, with its smile of triumph ; the bonny bridesmaids circling round the altar; and Norah, pale, stately, beautiful, with that fatal wreath on her fair young brow, and her transparent veil floating like a mist about the glorious form that he had hoped against hope some day to make his own. Fool! fool! could he blame her? What right had he to suppose she was to waste her youth and beauty on a chance, and wait years for him? He ought to have known it. He ought to have expected it. But it was hard to bear. Hard, hard, to bear! Particularly now! Then he leaned his head on the table and wept freely—bitterly. Poor fellow! he was weakened, you see, by illness, and not himself, or he would surely never have given way like this. After a while he rallied, for the lad did not want courage, and, weak as he was, summoned up pride to help him. I think it hurt him then more than at first. Presently he grew angry, as men often do when very sorrowful, and turned fiercely against the love he had so cherished for months, vowing that it was all feverish folly and illusion, a boy's malady, that must be got over and done with before he enters on a man's work. He ought to have known the truth long ago. He had read of such things in his Ovid, in his Lemprière, in Thackeray's biting pages, clandestinely devoured at study-hours, beneath a volume of Whewell's *Dynamics*, or Gibbon's *Roman Empire*. *Varium et mutabile* seemed the verdict alike of Latin love-poet and classical referee ; while the English novelist, whose sentiments so strangely influence both young and old, spoke of the subject with a grim pity, half in sorrow, half in anger, excusing with quaint phrases and pathetic humour the inconstancy of her whose very nature it is to be fascinated by novelty and subject to the influence of change.

"I suppose women are all so!" concluded the invalid, with a sigh ; and then he remembered Mother Briggs' account of his accident, and his illness ; of the nurse that had tended him so indefatigably and so devotedly ; wondering who she was, and what she was, when he was likely to see her, whether she was pretty, and why she was there.

Notwithstanding all this, he began to read over the paragraph about the wedding once again, when there came a tap, and the bump of a tray against his door. The chicken-broth now made its appearance, flanked by long strips of toast, and borne by a comely young woman quietly dressed, whom he recognised at once as his former fishing acquaintance, Miss Draper of Ripley Mill.

Fanny's beauty, always of the florid order, had not

suffered from watching and anxiety. On the contrary, it appeared more refined and delicate than of old ; nor, though she had been very pale in the passage, was there any want of colour in her face while she set down the tray. Never in her life had she blushed so scarlet, never trembled and turned away before from the face of man.

He half rose, in natural courtesy, but his knees would not keep straight, and he was fain to sit down again. She came round behind him, and busied herself in setting the pillows of his chair.

"Miss Draper," he began, trying to turn and look her in the face, "what must you think of me? Never to have recognised you! Never to have thanked you! I only heard to-day of all your kindness ; and till you came in this moment, I had not found out who it was that nursed me. I must have been very ill indeed not to know you."

Weak and faint as it came, it was the same voice that so won on her that soft summer's day when the Mayfly was on Ripley Water. It was the same kindly, gentle, high-bred manner that acted on the low-born woman like a charm.

"You have been very ill, sir," she murmured, still keeping behind him. "You frightened us all for a day or two. It's Heaven's mercy you came through."

He sighed. Was he thinking that for him it would have been more merciful never to have recovered a consciousness that only made him vulnerable? Better to have been carried down the lodging-house stairs in his coffin, than to walk out on his feet with the knowledge that Norah Vandeleur was lost to him for ever! But he could not be ungrateful, and his voice trembled with real feeling, while he said, "It is not only Heaven's mercy, but your care, that has saved me. You must not think I don't feel it. It seems so absurd for a fellow not to be able to stand up. I—I can't say half as much as I should like."

Still behind him, still careful that he should not see her face, though there were no blushes to hide now. Indeed, she had grown very pale again. Her voice, too, was none of the steadiest, while she assumed the nurse's authority once more, and bade him begin on his chicken-broth without delay.

"I know it's good," said she, "for I helped to make it. Both Mrs. Briggs and Doctor Driver say you must have plenty of nourishment. Hadn't you better eat it before it's cold?"

Convalescence in early manhood means the hunger of

"And drew her towards him"

the wolf. He obeyed at once; and Fanny, fairly turning her back on him, looked steadfastly out of the window.

I do not know why there should be less romance in the consumption of chicken-broth by an infantry ensign than in the cutting of bread and butter by a German maiden, with blue eyes, flaxen hair, and well-developed form. It all depends upon the accessories. I am not sure but that on reflection most of us would be forced to admit that the tenderest moments of our lives are connected in some manner with the act of eating and drinking. Of all ways to the heart, the shortest seems perhaps to be down the throat. In the higher classes, what a deal of love-making is carried on at dinner-parties, picnics, above all, ball-suppers. In the middle, a suitor never feels that he is progressing satisfactorily till he is asked to tea; and in the lower, although bread and cheese as well as bacon may prove non-conductors, a good deal of business, no doubt, is done through the agency of beer! "Venus perishes," says the Latin proverb, "without the assistance of Bacchus and Ceres." Nor, although I am far from disputing that love-fits may be contracted so violent as to prove incurable even by starvation, have I any doubt that the disease is more fatal to a full man than one fasting. In other words, that few admirers, if any, are so attentive, so plastic, so playful, altogether so agreeable, before breakfast as after dinner.

Gerard finished every crumb of his toast and every drop of his chicken-broth undisturbed. The avidity with which he ate was in itself the best possible omen of returning health and strength; and yet Fanny still looked out at window, on the dull deserted street. Even the tinkling of his spoon in the empty basin did not serve to arrest her attention, and he would have gone and shaken her by the hand, to thank her once more for her kindness, but that he knew he could not walk those three paces to save his life.

His pocket-handkerchief was on the chimney-piece; he wanted it, and could not reach it. Nothing was more natural than that he should ask his nurse to hand it him, neither was it possible for her to refuse compliance; but as their fingers met, although she tried hard to keep her face averted, he could not but see that the tears were streaming down her cheeks—tears, as his own heart told him, of joy and thanksgiving for his safety—tears of pity and affection——and of love.

He clasped the hand that touched his own, and drew her towards him. "Miss Draper—Fanny!" said he, never a

word more, and she flung herself down on her knees, and buried her face on his arm, bursting out sobbing as if her heart would break; and then he knew it all—all;—the whole sad story from the beginning of their acquaintance —the ill-matched, ill-conceived attachment out of which happiness could never come! He pitied her, he soothed her, he stroked her glossy hair, he bent his own face down to hers.

"I love you! I love you!" she sobbed out wildly. "I loved you from the first—the day we walked together by Ripley Water. I can't help it. It's too late now. If you had died, I should have died too. If you go away and leave me, I'll break my heart. Oh! if I was a lady! If only I was a lady! Why shouldn't I be?"

He was weakened by illness. He was alone in the world now. His heart, all sore and quivering, was painfully sensitive to the touch of consolation and affection. What wonder if he suffered his wiser nature to be overborne? what wonder if he accepted all that was so lavishly poured out at his feet, and shutting his eyes wilfully to consequences, promised Fanny Draper that she should be "a lady" as soon as ever he was strong enough to stand up and say Amen in a church?

Mr. Bruff, could he have obtained admittance, might have taken a very pretty lesson in stage love-making during the next half-hour. Gerard Ainslie, lending himself willingly to that which he knew all the time was an illusion, vowed to his own heart that he was acting nobly, honourably, chivalrously, according to the dictates of gratitude, and as in duty bound; while Fanny Draper, in love for the first time in her life, felt she had gained everything hitherto desired by her ill-regulated fancy, and was ready, nay, willing, to take the consequences of her venture, be they what they might.

CHAPTER XX

THE HONEYMOON

THERE was a pretty little room at Oakover, opening by a French window into a sheltered flower-garden, which Mrs. Vandeleur had voted from the very first especially adapted for a breakfast-parlour. Its bright paper, pretty furniture, choice engravings, and, above all, abundance of light, afforded every encouragement to that cheerfulness of mood and feelings with which it is advisable to begin the day. It must have been an obstinate fit of ill-humour to resist all these accessories, assisted by a glimpse of sunshine, a well-served breakfast, and a comfortable fire.

Into this pleasant apartment stepped Mr. Vandeleur about ten o'clock in the morning towards the conclusion of that sequestered period termed conventionally his honeymoon, but on the bridegroom's worn face sat an expression of restlessness and discontent in keeping neither with time nor place. He walked up to the fire, seized the poker, gave a savage dig at the coals, and rang the bell with a short, stern jerk that brought the smoothest and politest of servants to the door in less than thirty seconds. They were all a good deal afraid of him below-stairs, and it is needless to say nobody was better waited on than the master of Oakover.

"Has Mrs. Vandeleur been down?" said he, glancing impatiently at the unused breakfast-service.

"I think not, sir," answered the domestic respectfully; "but Miss Glancer's just come from her room, and I'll inquire."

"Tell her to go up again and let her mistress know breakfast is ready," said his master sternly, and walked off to the window muttering, not so low but that the servant overheard—

"Not down yet! She never is down when I am! To be sure, Glancer's the worst maid in Europe. I can see that with half an eye. And a saucy, troublesome jade into the

bargain. Margaret always used to breakfast with me. But this one—this one! I wonder whether I've been a cursed fool? Sometimes I think I have!"

Then Mr. Vandeleur, taking no notice of his breakfast, nor the unopened letters piled beside his plate, whistled, shook his head, thrust his hands into his pockets, and looked out at window. It was late autumn, almost early winter, and a coating of hoar-frost still lay crisp and white where the lawn was sheltered by an angle of the building from the sun. Such flowers as had not been removed were sadly blackened by the cold; while, though the tan and russet hues of the waning year still clothed their lower branches, the topmost twigs of the trees cut bare and leafless against the deep, blue, dazzling sky. The scene without was bright, clear, and beautiful; but chilling, hard, and cheerless, all the same. Perhaps it was the more in keeping with certain reflections of the proprietor within. For five minutes he stood motionless, looking steadfastly at a presumptuous robin smirking and sidling and pruning itself on the gravel-walk.

In that five minutes how many bygone scenes did he conjure up! How many years, how much of an ill-spent lifetime, did he travel back into the past! London, in the heyday of youth, and health, and hope. Fashion, position, popularity, smiles of beauty, smiles of fortune, social and material success of every kind. Paris, in the prime of manhood, when the gilt was perhaps a little off the gingerbread, but the food tasted luscious and satisfying still. More smiles, more beauty: the smiles franker, broader, sprightlier; the beauty less retiring, less difficult to please. Then England once more, with its field sports, its climate, its comforts, its conveniences; the boon companions, the jovial gatherings, the liberty, even the licence of a bachelor in a country home. After that, marriage. Spirits still buoyant, health still unbroken, and the dear, fragile, devoted, tender wife, of whom, even now, here waiting for his bride to breakfast with him, he could not think without a gnawing pain about his heart!

His bride! The one woman of his whole life whom he had most desired to win. Not to please his fancy, as he knew too well, not to minister to his vanity; but—and he smiled to think he was using the language of idiotic romance and drawing-room poetry, of unfledged boys and boarding-school girls—to satisfy his longing to be loved. He, the used-up, worn-out, grizzled old reprobate! What business

had he, as he asked himself, grinning and clenching his hands, what business had he with hopes and fancies like these? After such a life as his, was he to be rewarded at last by the true affection of a pure and spotless woman? If there was such a thing as retribution in this world, what had he a right to expect? Dared he tell her a tenth, a hundredth of his follies, his iniquities, his crimes? Could he look into those guileless eyes, and not blush with very shame at his own memories? Could he rest his head on that white sinless breast, and not quiver with remorse, self-scorn, and self-reproach? Still, if she did but love him, if she could but love him, he felt there was a chance for repentance and amendment; he felt there was hope even for him.

If she could but love him. Alas! he was beginning to fear she had not learned to love him yet.

A quiet step in the passage, the rustle of a dress, and Norah entered the room. Norah, looking twice as beautiful as on the wedding morning, though still far too pale and grave and stately for a bride. Her deep eyes had always something of melancholy in them, but they were deeper and darker than ever of late; while on the chiseled features of the fair, proud face, for months had been settling an expression of repressed feeling and enforced composure, that caused it to look tranquil, reserved, and matronly beyond its years.

She was beautifully dressed, though in somewhat sober colours for a bride; and as Vandeleur turned round on her entrance, his eyes could not but be pleased with the folds of falling drapery that marked while they enhanced the faultless outline of her shape.

She passed his letters with scarcely a glance, though the uppermost of the pile was addressed in a hand, feeble, delicate, scrawling, not to be mistaken for a man's. Few wives so lately married but would have betrayed some curiosity as to the correspondent. Norah saw nothing, it would seem, and suspected nothing, for she sat down before the urn without a word, and proceeded to make tea in a somewhat listless manner, now becoming habitual.

"You're late, my dear," said Vandeleur, seating himself too, and proceeding to open his letters.

"Am I?" she replied absently. "I'm afraid I'm very lazy. And I don't sleep so well as I used."

It was true enough. I suppose nobody does sleep well who is haunted by a sense of having acted unfairly towards

two other people, and having lost at the same time all the hopes once glowing so brightly in the future. Norah's slumbers were broken, no doubt, and though

The name she dared not name by day

was never on her lips in her waking hours, the phantom of its owner, with sad, reproachful eyes, paid her, perhaps, many an unwelcome visit in the visions of the night.

She went on quietly with her breakfast, taking no more notice of her husband, till a burst of repressed laughter caused her to look up astonished; and she observed him convulsed with a merriment peculiar to himself, that from some unexplained cause always impressed her with a sense of fear.

Vandeleur had started slightly when he opened the topmost letter of his pile. He had not at first recognised the handwriting, so much had some dozen lessons and a few weeks' painstaking done for his correspondent, but the signature set all doubt at rest, while the matter of the epistle seemed to afford food for considerable mirth and approbation, denoted by such half-spoken expressions as the following:—

"Clever girl!" "How right I was!" "I said she would if she had the chance!" "What an inconceivable young fool!" "I know it! I know it!" "You deserve as much again, and you shall have it by return of post!"

The letter was indeed explicit enough. It ran as follows:—

"HONOURED SIR,—In accordance with my promise, I now take up my pen to apprise you that everything has been arranged as I have reason to believe you desired, and you will see by the signature below that my earthly happiness is now assured and complete. Sir, it was but last week as I became the lawful wife of Mr. Ainslie, and I lose no time in acquainting you with the same. I am indeed a happy woman, though you will not care to hear this—perhaps will not believe that I speak the truth. As heaven is above me, I declare my Gerard is all and everything I can wish. Sir, I would not change places with any woman in the world.

"He has met with a serious accident in a fall from his horse, and been very bad, as you may have heard, but is doing well now, and with my nursing will soon be strong and hearty again. We are living in lodgings at the same address. Of course I have been put to considerable expense, particularly at first, but I am aware that I can safely trust your generous promise, and fulfilment of what you said you would do.

"Mr. Vandeleur,—sir,—do not laugh at me; I love my husband very dearly, and nothing shall ever come between us now.—Your dutiful and obliged,

"FANNY AINSLIE."

"Capital! capital!" exclaimed Vandeleur when he reached the end. "'Pon my soul, it's too absurd, too ludicrous! What will the world come to next?"

"Something seems to amuse you," observed Norah quietly.

"If it's no secret, suppose you tell it me—I feel this morning as if a laugh would do me good."

"Secret, my dear!" repeated Vandeleur. "It won't be a secret long. Certainly not, if newspapers and parish registers tell the truth. It would seem incredible, only I have it from the lady herself. Such a lady! I should think she couldn't spell her own name six weeks ago. Would you believe it, Norah? That young fool, Gerard Ainslie, has been and married a girl you remember down here, called Fanny Draper. A bold tawdry girl who used to be always hanging about Ripley Mill. Here's her letter. You can read it if you like."

He looked very hard at Norah while he gave it, but his wife never moved an eyelash, taking it from his hand coldly and impenetrably as if it had been an egg or a teaspoon. With the same fixed face and impassive manner she read it through from end to end, and returned it, observing only in a perfectly unmoved voice—

"I believe she loves him. It is an unfortunate marriage, but I hope he will be happy."

Mrs. Vandeleur appeared, however, less amused than her husband; nor do I think she took this opportunity of enjoying the laugh she thought would do her so much good on that cold frosty morning at Oakover.

CHAPTER XXI

RETRIBUTION

THERE is something unspeakably touching in that holy parable which describes the desolation of him who has been hitherto possessed by an unclean spirit, as he wanders aimlessly through dry and desert places, "seeking rest, and finding none!" John Vandeleur, not yet married a year, had already discovered that for him there was to be no such repose as springs from a quiet heart. In his youth and in his prime he had scorned the idea of Peace, and now, thirsting for her loving murmur, longing to be fanned by her snowy wing, he felt that over the surface of those troubled waters, in which his soul was sunk, the dove, however weary, must flit in vain for evermore.

Climbing the Taunus mountain with long athletic strides, he heeded little the glorious panorama of Rhineland stretching round him to the horizon. What cared he for the polished stems and gleaming foliage of those giant beeches, or the black lines of stunted pine against the summer sky? The wide Palatinate might smile beneath him, rising as he ascended into tier on tier of vineyards, cornfields, meadowland, and forest. The winding river, here a sheet of silver, there a gleam of gold, might dwindle to a single thread ere it vanished in the dim distance, that melted cloud and mountain together in one blue vapoury haze, but Vandeleur scarcely turned his head to look. He certainly was not of the meek, nor in the sense in which they are heirs of all that is bright and beautiful in nature, could he be said to "inherit the earth."

He walked on faster and faster, goaded as it would seem by some gnawing pain within, but stopping short at intervals to look round and make sure he was alone, when he would burst out in harsh peals of laughter, loud and long, yet suggestive of anything but mirth. Then he would hasten on,

gesticulating, muttering, sometimes even raising his voice as though in conversation with another. "I am miserable!" so ran his wild unruly thoughts, half silenced, half expressed. "Miserable! I know it—I feel it. And it's my own fault! I see that poor German devil in a blouse working his heart out at a dung-heap for forty kreutzers a day, and, by Heaven, I envy him! I, John Vandeleur, the man so many fellows will tell you is the luckiest dog on earth. And why? Because he lived to please himself till he was tired of everything, and now when he would give the heart of his body to please another, he can't do it! Not man enough, forsooth! What is there in me that this cold insensible girl cannot be brought to love? Oh! you fool, you cursed fool! You, who knew it all, who had gone the whole round, who had once even found what you wanted and been almost happy for a while—to play your liberty against a pair of blue eyes and a knot of chestnut hair dipped in gold! But what eyes, what hair she has! Ah! Norah, why can you not love me? Perhaps it's my punishment. Perhaps there is a Providence, and it serves me right. Perhaps a man has no business to expect that he shall wage aggressive warfare on them for a score of years, and win the best and noblest and fairest to make him happy at the finish. What fun I had, to be sure. Ah! those orgies in Paris, those suppers after the opera,—the masquerading, the champagne, the dancing, the devilry of the whole game! And now it makes me sick to think of it all. What has come over me? Is it that I am getting old? Yes, it must be that I am getting old. It's no use. Time won't stop even for John Vandeleur, though the staunch old 'plater' has waited on me patiently enough while I made the running, I must allow. I am strong and active too. I feel as if I could fight, and I am sure I could dance still. Not many of the young ones could touch me, up this hill now, for a breather, fair heel and toe; but there are wrinkles on my face,—I saw them this morning,—and whole streaks of grey in my hair and whiskers. It must be that—I am too old for her, poor girl, and she can't bring herself to care for me, though she tries so hard. And it worries her—it frets her, the darling. It makes her pale and sad and weary. Sawdor's an ass! He knew he was lying when he talked of Oakover being too cold for her in the winter. It wasn't the cold outside that made my pretty one so pale. He knew it! And he knew he was lying, too, when he ordered us here for change of air, and bothered about her being below the mark and wanting tone. Idiots! What the devil do doctors mean by talking about tone, as if a woman

was a pianoforte or a big drum! And I should like to know why the air of Homburg is different from the air of Richmond or Brighton, or London, for the matter of that! I never knew a woman except Norah that London didn't agree with in the season. No, what makes poor Norah ill is being my wife. It is I who have injured her—I who would do anything to make her happy. And how can I repair the harm I've done? She has a devilish good jointure; why not set her free? It is but a leap in the air, a touch to a trigger. Nay, there are easier ways than those. And is life worth having after all? I should know better than most people: I've had the best of everything, done almost everything in my time, and, upon my word, I hardly think it is! What with rent-days, servants, men of business, lame horses, and that eternal dressing and undressing, there's a deal of trouble connected with terrestrial existence. I daresay the other place isn't half such a bore. I wonder if there is another place. I've a deuced good mind to find out soon—this very day. Not till after dinner, though. I haven't had an appetite since I came here, but I think mountain air and a twelve-mile walk ought to do it. Holloa! who's this in a nankeen jacket? I do believe it's Tourbillon. Holà, hè. C'est toi, n'est-ce pas, Tourbillon? Parole d'honneur, mon cher, je ne m'en doutais pas. Il parait donc, qu'il n'y a que les montagnes qui ne se rencontrent—Hein?"

The individual thus accosted, whom Vandeleur's quick pace had overtaken going up the hill, turned, stood for a moment, as it were transfixed in an attitude of theatrical astonishment, and then folded the Englishman in a nankeen embrace, with many quiet protestations denoting his extreme delight at this unexpected meeting, couched in the English language, which, priding himself on his proficiency, he spoke as only a Frenchman can. Count Tourbillon was remarkably handsome, about two or three and thirty, and some years before had formed a close intimacy with Vandeleur at Paris. The count was essentially what his countrymen term a *viveur*, leading a life of systematic profligacy and self-indulgence with a happy philosophy that seemed to accept Vice as the natural element of humanity. He would take you by the arm, and detail to you some proceeding of flagrant iniquity with the measured accent and calm approval of one who relates a meritorious instance of benevolence, or expatiates on a beautiful law of nature. Epigrammatic rather than fluent, terse rather than voluble, contrary to the accepted type of his nation, he affected an extraordinary composure and *insouci-*

ance in the more important, as in the more trivial affairs of daily life. He would dance a *cotillon*, carve a chicken, or run an adversary through the body, with the same immovable face, the same polite and self-reliant manner, that seemed only intent on strictly following out the rules of politeness, and conscientiously meeting the exigencies of society. His figure was firmly put together and strong, cast in the round mould of his nation. His face very handsome and sparkling, with its ruddy brown complexion that no excess seemed to pale, and its bright black eyes never dull with fatigue nor dimmed with wine. Blessed with an iron constitution, he conscientiously made the worst possible use of its advantages.

"And you have been here long, my friend?" said he, taking Vandeleur affectionately by the arm and turning him downhill for a walk back to Homburg. "For me, I have been voyaging here, there, what you call 'on the loose,' and I only found myself at Frankfort last evening. I journeyed on at once. No, I have been too often in Frankfort to linger about the Juden-Gasse, and I have already seen too frequently the naked Ariadne on her Lion. So I took the railroad, slept at the Quatre Saisons, and marched up here like a conscript, because the mountain air always does me good. Ah! rogue! I know what you would ask. No, I have not been to work yet. 'Bizness,' as you call it. I have not even looked at the play-tables. Be tranquil; there are yet many hours till midnight. I little thought it would arrive to me to meet so old a friend here on this mountain, which, for the rest, interests me not at all. And you, how goes it? Frankly, you look well, you have more flesh, you do not age by a day."

The Vandeleur to whom Tourbillon thus addressed himself was indeed a very different man from the Vandeleur of five minutes ago. Keen, excitable, on the surface at least impressionable, and influenced by the temptation or the circumstances of the moment, he had become once more, to all outward appearance, the agreeable acquaintance, the jovial companion, the ready man of the world, whose society Tourbillon had found so pleasant in Paris a few short years ago. There are many characters of considerable depth thus easily affected by external agencies, of which they throw off the consequences as rapidly as they arise. Far down beneath the dark cold waters, slime and weeds, and ugly rotting waifs, and dead men's bones, may be lying, foul, secret, and undisturbed, though the surface be smiling calm and blue in the summer sunshine, or leaping gladly into life and movement, fresh, white, and curling under a ten-knot breeze.

It is part of the creed professed by such men as Vandeleur to seem *bon camarade* before the world, whatever be amiss within, and perhaps they do cheat the Avenger out of a stripe or two, in this strict observance of their faith.

"Like me," replied the Englishman. "I have hardly yet been here long enough for Mrs. Vandeleur to begin the Louisen-Brünnen. You don't know Mrs. Vandeleur. I must present you. Tourbillon, I'm not so easily amused as I used to be. This is a d——d slow place!"

"Slow!" replied the other, lighting a paper cigarette, and inhaling its fumes into his lungs. "No place can be slow, as you call it, when one has a charming wife; and that yours is charming I need not be told. You shall present me to madame this very afternoon, when I have made my toilet. I trust madame derives benefit already from the waters and the air of the Taunus?"

"I hope so," answered Vandeleur absently. "There ought to be some redeeming quality in such a hole as this. I wish now we had come through Paris, only they said it would be bad for her. Why is it, I wonder, that everything pleasant must be either wrong, expensive, or unwholesome? Sometimes all three?"

"Ah! you reflect, my friend," replied Tourbillon; "but your reflections are not of the philosopher. To be wrong! that is, not to think as I do. To be expensive! that is, to respect civilisation, to observe the laws of political economy. And to be unwholesome! Bah! There is no such thing. All excess cures itself, and inclination is the best guide. I wish you had been in Paris three weeks ago, my friend. They asked for you at the Jockey Club, and Frontignac even vowed he would go to England to fetch you. We had an entertainment that only wanted your assistance to be superb!"

"I should have thought my companions were all dead or ruined, or shut up," said Vandeleur, laughing. "You fellows live pretty fast over there, and I haven't been on a Boulevard since Charles Martel won your two-year-old stakes, and Frontignac lost fifty thousand francs, because he wouldn't believe what I told him; and that is how long ago?"

"More than a year, since he is first favourite at present for the French Derby. And imagine that you are not yet forgotten! Why, supper was hardly over before Madelon talked of you with tears in her eyes. 'You will see him at Baden,' she said; 'these English all go to Baden. Tell him that I will never speak to him again, but that he still lives in my dreams!' See what it is to have a heart!"

Tourbillon stopped to light a fresh cigarette, and Vandeleur laughed a laugh not pleasant to hear.

"Such a heart as Madelon's is indeed worth gold," said he; "and a good deal of it, too, as most of us have found out to our cost. I am sorry, though, she has not forgotten me, because it shows that she does not expect to find so egregious a fool again in France or England! And how she used to bore me!"

"I permit not one woman to bore me more than another," answered the Frenchman. "But I agree with you. Madelon ceased to be amusing when she began to educate herself. The most charming person I have seen lately is a South Sea Islander, who has only been six weeks in Europe. I met her at Baden. She speaks nothing but Tahitian, and her figure is perfect. I understand also that she is most beautifully tattooed."

"With a fish-bone through her nose, of course," laughed Vandeleur. "Count, I make you my compliments. I do believe if a female gorilla were to drive through the Bois de Boulogne in a mail-phaeton, a dozen of you would be in love with her before dinner-time. Was there any fun at Baden, and had you any luck?"

"I never got into one good *série* the whole fortnight," answered Tourbillon. "There was a run on the Red the only evening I didn't play, and an Englishman won a heavy stake. For company, there were Russians, of course, and a few of our old friends, but not so many as last year. It soon ceased to be amusing, and then I came away."

They were nearing Homburg now, and had already entered the long straight avenue of poplars that leads from the pine forest to the town. Tourbillon was still musing on the *trente-et-quarante*.

"That Englishman had a good system," he observed thoughtfully. "It was better than mine. We came together by the railroad yesterday, and he explained it to me in detail. I think I shall try it this evening."

"What Englishman?" asked Vandeleur, who had forgotten all about his companion's losses at Baden-Baden, and was meditating, in truth, on Norah, and her prescribed glasses of water.

"Enslee was his name—Enslee," replied Tourbillon; "you must know him, I think. He is quite young; what you call 'nice boy.' He is a gentleman, I am sure, and has a pretty wife. She plays too, but it is a woman's game. Feeble, yet bold, in the wrong time. She will never make the bank leap

at rouge-et-noir, though her style might be dangerous enough for the roulette.

"Enslee," repeated Vandeleur. "Enslee! No; I can't remember anybody of that name."

"I shall show her to you!" exclaimed Tourbillon exultingly. "You will give me credit for my taste. A bright, fresh-coloured woman, not very tall, with a perfectly rounded figure. I tell you, my friend, her shape is a model. She has beautiful black hair and eyes, but her complexion is as red and white as if she were a blonde. When she enters a society she seems to sparkle like a jewel. Let us see. She is not a pearl nor a diamond—no, she is not grande dame enough. She is a ruby—a brilliant, beautiful ruby. I will present you this evening. I know them both well. Ah! I turn down here for the Quatre Saisons. Au revoir, mon cher! One moment! I remember now. Enslee addresses her as Fanchon,—what you call *Fanni!*"

Vandeleur turned to go to his lodgings, the most beautifully furnished and the best situated in the whole town. Before he reached the door it all flashed upon him at once.

"Enslee! Fanni!" said he. "Of course it is! Good heavens! who would have thought of their turning up here? Gerard Ainslie, her old love—my Norah's old love. No, I'm not tired of life yet; and I'm not going to be fool enough, Mr. Ainslie, to give you a clear stage before you're ruined, an event that in the common course of nature cannot be far distant. The match isn't over, isn't it? Well, we shall see who can hold out longest. The old one isn't beat yet. Though she mayn't love me, I don't think she can still love you. My darling, there is a chance even now; and if I could but win, you would save me body and soul!"

So he went up to dress without presenting himself before his wife, heated and dusty after walking, but his face fell sadly while he looked in the glass and thought of the odds against him, in the battle he had resolved to fight out with all his heart and soul.

CHAPTER XXII

FRENCH LESSONS

ALL women improve in appearance after marriage. With ourselves the effect of that valuable institution is precisely the reverse. I have a friend who boasts he can distinguish the married men from the single in any strange society he enters. Nay, he even goes so far as to assert that he knows a married man's umbrella in the hall of a club. My friend is a bachelor, and I think he is a little hard upon those who have shown a more adventurous spirit than his own. Nevertheless there can be no doubt that the husband thrives less obviously in a domesticated state than the wife. Fanny Draper had been a very pretty girl, no doubt, when she broke the hearts of her rustic admirers about Ripley, and even attracted the baneful notice of the squire at Oakover; but she was no more to be compared to the Mrs. Ainslie who had spent six weeks in Paris and a month at Baden-Baden, than the Cinderella in the chimney-corner to the glittering princess of the glass slippers, who leaves the ball at midnight, having dazzled society with her splendour and magnificence. Unmarried, she had been but the crystal picked up, dim and rugged, from the beach. Married, she was the same crystal cut and polished, set by the jeweller, transformed into a flashing gem.

Mr. and Mrs. Ainslie now occupied a very commodious apartment "of four pieces," as it was termed by the half-French, half-German landlady who let it them, in a cheerful street not far removed from the Kursaal, and other attractions of pleasant, idle, wicked, good-for-nothing Homburg. They had now been married—well, long enough to be, perhaps, a little tired of it. Tired of it, that is to say, under the conditions of a narrow income, dwindling gradually to nothing at all; an utter dissimilarity of tastes, opinions, pursuits, ideas, and inclinations; a strong though unacknowledged sentiment of disappointment on both sides, and the daily inconveniences

attending that mode of existence which is called "living by one's wits."

Fanny, indeed, was at first over head and ears in love. It is but justice to say that with a very little encouragement she would have continued so. Gerard, on the other hand, had sacrificed himself, as he felt twenty times a day, to a morbid feeling of pique and disappointment, acting on a weakened state of bodily health, exposed to the seductions of a careful, loving nurse, and the fire of a pair of dark eyes, that softened and glistened whenever they looked in his face. He had given way in a moment of tenderness, without reflection, and behold him tied for life! "Till death do us part." These were the words he had repeated so lightly, and hour by hour he became more alive to their terrible significance. He had never expected it to answer, and it never did. In the first place, the only relative he possessed, his great-uncle, was furious, as the nephew knew he would be, and withdrew his countenance at once. The few friends on whom this young husband thought he could count soon showed him the fallacy of such calculations. One had lost a "cracker," and could hardly pay his own debts. Another was on the eve of making the same application to the petitioner. A third had promised his grandmother never to back a bill, and owed it to himself not to lend ready money. Everybody seemed, by some fatality, to be living at the same address in Short Street—a locality, by the way, in which some of our pleasantest acquaintances inhabit the highest numbers. Gerard had nothing to depend on but his little capital and his commission. The first he soon exhausted, and the second he unwillingly sold. On its proceeds he was now leading the unsatisfactory, desultory life of an adventurer who tries to remain a gentleman. Of course he went abroad. Equally of course, with no career before him, no profession, no fixed pursuits to employ the force and energies of youth, he became a gambler, and for a time had little reason to complain of Fortune. He was what is termed a *good* player by those who are illogical and superstitious enough to believe that there can exist any element of skill in roulette, rouge-et-noir, and such games as are avowedly and essentially ventures of pure chance. He would abstain from soliciting Fortune when she seemed coy, but if she smiled, would never hesitate to confide himself blindly and recklessly to her care. At Baden-Baden the goddess had treated him like a spoilt child, and when he came on to Homburg he found himself possessed of all the necessaries, and many luxuries, of life, including a new dress or two for Fanny,

besides a goodly sum of ready money in *rouleaux*, and honest *billets de banque* for himself.

These, it is needless to observe, he kept in store for possible reverses. None of us ever knew a gambler lay by his winnings, or in any way convert them into real property. It would seem that by some inscrutable law of nature no sooner does a piece of gold touch the green cloth of a gaming-table than it becomes a mere counter, and a mere counter it remains till it finds its way back to the croupier's rake, and is absorbed by the bank once more. A man who plays every day of his life, however, is sure not to be without good clothes, clean gloves, and such outward appliances of prosperity as demand only a supply of pocket-money. Gerard, in his pleasant lodgings opposite the Kursaal, dressed, hatted, and ready to go out, looked very handsome, and very like a gentleman, although a keen observer might already have detected faint traces of those lines about his lips which only constant, unremitting anxiety scores on so young a face. Fanny glanced admiringly at her husband as he put a cigar in his mouth, and reviewed his comely person in the glass between the windows.

"Going out so soon, dear?" said she, laying down the French novel she had been poring over assiduously, with a dictionary in her lap. "Why, it's too early for the tables yet. You know you never have any luck before three o'clock."

"Early!" repeated Gerard; "the time must pass quicker with you than it does with me. I thought it was nearly dinner-time till I heard that tiresome brass band strike up with its eternal 'Goldbreckel' galop. You've got an amusing book, Fan; you're in luck. I wish I could find anything that amused me."

She looked quickly up at him, but the careless tone hurt less than it would have done six months ago, because under repeated knocks the heart must harden if it does not break. Still there was a little tremble in her voice while she replied—

"The time passes with me, Gerard, not because I am happy, but because I am employed. If I didn't work hard, how could I ever expect to speak French as well as I ought to do in my position as your wife?"

"Not happy!" repeated Gerard, for although he did not love her, he was sufficiently a man to feel aggrieved. "Thank you, Fanny! And yet I don't know why you should be happy. Our life has been a sad mistake all through. I knew it from the first, and you are beginning to find it out now."

"You have no right to say so!" she exclaimed, with the colour rising in her cheek, and her eyes flashing. "I know perfectly well how much you gave up to marry me. I have been reminded of it often enough;—no! not in words, Gerard; you have always been a gentleman, I will say that. Perhaps that was why I used to be so fond of you. But in tone, in manner, in a thousand little things a woman finds out too soon, even though she isn't a lady born! But I've tried hard, Gerard, hard—no, I'm not going to cry—to be good enough for you. Why, I could scarcely sign my name, not properly, when I knew you first; and now there isn't a duchess or a countess as writes—I mean no lady in the land can write a better hand than mine. The same with grammar, the same with music, the same with French, though some of the words does—do come very hard to remember when you want 'em. No, dear, I'm not a lady, I know, but I'm trying my best to be one; and a woman's whole heart is worth something after all, though she *is* only a miller's daughter, as you'll find out one of these days when it's too late!"

"I don't want to find out anything but a good system for the *trente-et-quarante*," answered he, a little pettishly. "I've made too many discoveries in my time, and one of them is"— Gerard stopped himself, for it was not his nature to be ungenerous, and he felt ashamed to utter the sentiment that quivered on his lip.

"Is what?" repeated Mrs. Ainslie, looking very resolute and handsome, with a burning colour fixed in her cheek. "Let us have it out, Gerard. I've strong nerves. If I'm not a lady, I've that at least to be thankful for, and I'm not afraid to hear the truth. Nor if I were a man should I be afraid to speak it, as you are!"

The taunt brought it out, though he repented a moment afterwards.

"Is this!" said he, settling his collar in the glass. "That a man is a fool to marry before he knows his own mind; but a man is a d——d fool who does know his own mind, and marries the wrong woman with his eyes open."

She never answered a word. His heart smote him, as well it might, the moment he had delivered this unmanly thrust; and if she had burst into tears and thrown herself upon his breast, who knows? Perhaps everything would have turned out differently. She bent over the dictionary instead, and hunted earnestly, as it seemed, for some crabbed French word. It must have been a minute or two before she looked up, and her face was bright, her voice

gay, though there was a hard metallic ring in it, while she observed—

"*Pieuvre!* what can *pieuvre* mean in a sentence like this? Can you explain it, Gerard? I shall never make sense of it. I must wait for the count; he promised to come in and give me a lesson this afternoon."

Gerard sneered.

"Tourbillon ought to be a good French master," said he, moving towards the door. "He must have brought a good many pupils to perfection, if all they say about him is true."

"At least he is too kind and patient," she answered bitterly, "to despise a woman for being ignorant, and working her heart out trying to learn."

But it is doubtful if Gerard heard her. He was half-way downstairs by this time, meditating I think less upon Count Tourbillon's proficiency in female tuition, than his own lately invented system of backing *couleur* at certain numerical intervals, while pursuing a regular course of play on the black and the red. It may perhaps be necessary to explain, for the benefit of those who are too wise to affect such games of chance, that *rouge* and *noir* are simply arbitrary terms expressing really the respective amount of "pips" on two lines of cards, the upper of which is dealt invariably for black, the lower for red. Whichever line (amounting, when summed up, to less than forty) counts nearest thirty-one, is considered to win, irrespective, except for those who are backing *couleur* (which involves a different speculation altogether), of the actual hue of the cards thus dealt.

Fanny watched her husband walk across the street, with a strange wistful expression on her handsome face. When he had disappeared, without once looking back, through the portals of the Kursaal, she rose and went to the glass. Here she stood for several minutes perusing every feature with unusual attention, till a well-known step on the stairs disturbed her self-examination, and she sat down again with her French novel and her dictionary, smiling a pecular smile that seemed to denote some fixed purpose finally adopted, rather than amusement, happiness, or peace of mind.

"Entrez!" said she, with a clear pleasant voice, and a very fair French accent, in reply to the knock at her chamber-door; and Count Tourbillon made his appearance, no longer in the nankeen jacket of morning *déshabille*, but dressed in perfect taste, and with as much care as if turned out for Hyde Park or the Bois de Boulogne in the height of the season.

The count knew he was good-looking, but was wise enough not to trust his good looks alone for ascendency over women. He had seen how fatal it is for an admirer to betray that he is thinking more of himself than his companion, and the ugliest man alive might have taken a lesson from Tourbillon in the self-forgetfulness he assumed when there was a lady in the room. He guessed Mrs. Ainslie was not born in the upper ranks, therefore an experienced tact told him his manner should be deferential in the extreme. He saw she was unaccustomed to extravagance, therefore he dressed more sumptuously than usual; and assuming that she must be neglected by her husband, *tout simplement*, as he told himself, because he *was* a husband, argued that constant attention, and ardent attachment, implied rather than declared, could not fail to bring this pretty and attractive woman to his feet.

"And how goes on the French?" said the count, after a few common-place salutations, compliments on *Mrs. Enslee's* good looks, and the usual news of the morning at the watering-place. "Ah! madame, you should return to Paris, where you made so short a stay. You are more than half a Frenchwoman now, in dress, in *tournure*, in refinement of speech and manner. A month in the capital would make you simply perfect. With your appearance, with your energy, with your force of character, a woman is capable of everything amongst us. You are wasted in such a place as this. You are indeed."

He sat a long way off; he held his hat in his hand. Nothing could be more frank, more friendly, more respectful, than his tone and bearing.

"I like Paris well enough, monsieur le comte," answered Fanny, "but after all, what am I there? I have no rank, no fortune, no position. My husband is not likely to make me one. I should be quite lost and trodden down in that great world of which we so often speak."

"What *are* you?" said the count, with admirably repressed rapture. "You are an Englishwoman. Forgive me, madame. A beautiful, an intelligent, may I not say an enterprising Englishwoman? Such characters make a perfect 'fury' in French society. And you know what we are—you know the success that a woman may have in our world if only she is launched under favourable auspices, and will play her own game, without suffering others to overlook her hand. I do assure you, madame, that if I were in your place (with your face and figure, *bien entendu*), in six weeks I would have the whole of Paris at my feet."

Did it cross her mind that Gerard had never appreciated her like this; that perhaps he might be taught her value by the example of others—perhaps love her better when he had lost her altogether, and it was too late; that this man, older, more experienced, moving in a far higher grade than her husband, rated her as she deserved; that *he* would not have left her with a bitter taunt on his lip, and walked wearily off to the play-tables in order to escape from her society? She was a woman, and such thoughts as these probably did cross her mind. She was a woman, and they probably did not pass away without leaving indelible traces behind.

"I should like it," she said, after a long pause of meditation, during which the count thought her face the prettiest he had ever seen. "I should like it, but it's impossible. You know how we are circumstanced. You see how we live. We make no secrets with you. We do not look upon you as a stranger. We consider you a real friend."

Tourbillon bowed, and his bow expressed gratitude homage, cordiality, even amusement.

"What you like, madame," he replied; "what you wish; rather I should say, what you *will*, is sure to come to pass. It is such women as yourself, if you only knew it, who govern the world. You are kind enough to believe me a friend. I am a devoted friend, and one whom you may command at any time, and for any service. You—you little know all I would do for you, if I might only have the chance! And now how gets on the French? I may well be proud of my pupil. If you go on as you have begun, in six months you will speak as well as I do."

Count Tourbillon knew better than most men when to make running, and when to lie by patiently and wait. He had risked as much as was prudent for the present, and it would be wise now to content himself with affording amusement, well aware that when he had taken leave she would revolve the whole interview in her mind, and interest must follow in good time. The count had determined to win the affections of this pretty Englishwoman, who no doubt seemed more attractive to him than she would have been to an admirer of her own nation in an equally high rank of life. Many little shortcomings of expression and manner that shocked and even disgusted Gerard Ainslie, utterly escaped the Frenchman, whose own countrywomen, by the way, are not quite so refined in the *boudoir* as in the *salon*. Tourbillon, I say, had determined to succeed, and perhaps overrated the difficulties in his path. Gerard, with blighted prospects,

reckless habits, and a preoccupied heart, was no match for the cold, calculating Parisian, armed with the experience of a hundred similar affairs.

Even at the disadvantage of his fifteen years or so, John Vandeleur would have proved a far more equal adversary, had the count taken it into his head to fancy himself in love with proud impassive Norah.

But they were all at cross purposes in this untoward little party at Homburg, and resembled pots of iron and porcelain vases hurtling together down the stream. Borne on the same waters, whirling in the same eddies, floating in the same direction, still the softest material is ever that which suffers most.

CHAPTER XXIII

"SUIVRE LA GAGNANTE"

LET us follow Gerard Ainslie into the plain, square, classical-looking building which constitutes the very heart and citadel, as it were, of the sort of town he now likes best to frequent, the shrine at which he seeks his oracles, the temple, alas! in which he elects to worship that false goddess, greater here than was ever Diana with the Ephesians, who demands from her votaries gold, affection, honour, self-respect, nay, is not to be satisfied at last, perhaps, unless they seal their devotion with their blood.

But the temple is very comfortable and well-arranged nevertheless. In it are found reading-rooms, ballrooms, smoking-rooms, music-rooms, and a noble suite of apartments devoted to the object for which the whole building is designed. It is with these that we have to do. It is to these Gerard bends his steps, dallying by the way, and turning often aside in the leisurely manner in which your confirmed gambler always gets to work. He is too anxious ever to *seem* anxious. So he wipes his feet carefully on the mat, though the varnished boots show not a speck of mud, removes his hat, lingers a moment in the reading-room adorned by an old French gentleman with a belly, a snuff-box, a white waistcoat, and a black wig, sitting as far as possible from a German lady of a certain age, in spectacles, dirty hands, and a brown silk dress, glancing at a grotesque caricature in the *Charivari*, a column of *Galignani*, turned upside down, and so passes out again, much edified, by a door that opens on one of the rooms appropriated to roulette.

Here he salutes with grave politeness two cosmopolitan ladies whose acquaintance he has made at Baden-Baden, correct in manner, quiet in deportment, though dressed in a style that is, to say the least of it, startling, and with countenances denoting that they have not experienced what they themselves call *bonheur au jeu*.

From these he edges his way to the nearest of the play-

tables, the outer circle, so to speak, in that Pandemonium, of which he will presently penetrate to the very centre.

Now in an English hothouse we have often had occasion to observe that the head-gardener, usually an impracticable Scotchman of considerable pretensions, leads us by cautious degrees from one forcing-house to another, each of a higher temperature than its predecessor, till we reach a stifling atmosphere, that makes egress into the chill winter's afternoon a delightful luxury. Also, in the Turkish bath, a preparation which perhaps even more than the English hothouse affords to the lost and reprobate a foretaste of their eventual destination, we are ushered at first into an oven, in which identity is simply an unbearable burden, before we are subjected to such a furnace as renders existence an insufferable torture. So, I say, in a German gambling establishment, the metaphorical caloric of high play increases by regular gradations as we get farther in. People who risk a florin or two at a time content themselves with dallying at roulette; those who are not satisfied unless they can count their gains in gold, affect one or other of the tables at which *trente-et-quarante*, sometimes called *rouge-et-noir*, is played for such moderate stakes as a couple of double-frederics or a few napoleons at a venture; while for the real gambler, the player with whom winning or losing means simply wealth or ruin, there is yet another table in another room distinguished for the silent attention and grave air of business pervading it, in which alone are heard such pithy sentences as these:—"Rouge gagne! Couleur perd!"—"Pardon, M'sieur. Quatre rouleaux. C'est juste!"—"Deux cent louis à la masse!"—"Tout à la masse!"—"Messieurs, le jeu est fait!"

The men and women, too, who walk out of this room always seem to be looking at something in the extreme distance, far beyond the walls of the Kursaal, far beyond the skyline of the Taunus, far beyond the confines of the Fatherland, and the glittering windings of its beautiful beloved Rhine.

Gerard's temper, though he would have scorned to admit it, was a little ruffled by his own impatience with Fanny. He did not feel in cue to play; had not that confidence in himself which often indeed deceives a gambler, but without which no man, I imagine, ever yet rose up the winner of a great stake. So he stood at the roulette-table, and amused himself by losing a good many napoleons in fruitless experiment on the figures, the zero, the columns, the middle numbers, every possible combination by which Fortune tries

to juggle her votary into the belief that he is not simply tossing up heads-and-tails with the *certainty* that one in every thirty-six hazards *must* be against the player.

"A martingale, bedad! that 'ud break the Bank of England!" said an Irish major standing behind, and watching Gerard back his losses systematically, with an admiration of his fortitude no whit damped by its ill-success.

A pretty little Frenchwoman who had waged her solitary venture of a couple of florins on the number she dreamed that morning, and lost, shot sympathising glances out of her velvety black eyes, as she withdrew to the sofa by the wall, where she had left her companion, and observed to the latter, "Il est beau joueur, ce monsieur là. Tiens, c'est dommage. Figurez-vous, Caroline. Il a doublé cinq fois de suite!" and Caroline, twice the age, not half so pretty, and on whom Gerard's good looks and dark eyes made no impression whatever, contented herself with a dissatisfied grunt in reply, and an utter condemnation of the whole process, room, table, croupier, players, and game.

It was one of *her* florins the other had risked according to their compact. These two mustered something like a napoleon and a half per week between them. On that modest sum they lodged, ate, drank, amused themselves, and even dressed becomingly. From it they scraped enough for their daily venture, taken in turn, at the roulette-table. If they won, a little *compôte*, or some such inexpensive luxury, was added to the daily fare, and they would treat themselves to tickets for the concert in the evening. If they lost—well! it had to be made up somehow. There would be no concert, of course, and perhaps they must content themselves with a glass of *eau sucrée* for dinner. And this is how people live at Homburg.

Gerard felt he was wasting time, so bowing to two or three more acquaintances of Baden-Baden, he proceeded at once to another table where the *trente-et-quarante* was languishing temporarily for want of worshippers. Its croupier motioned with his rake to a vacant seat, but the Englishman preferred taking his stand behind a grizzled Swedish colonel, watching the tactics of that warrior, and his inimitable patience under the losses they entailed. The Swede, consulting from time to time a little card at his elbow, on which he marked the variations of the game with a pin, played obviously on some complicated system of his own, to which, undeterred by continuous failure, he scrupulously adhered. It was provoking to observe a volatile old lady

opposite, with a Jewish face and bony knuckles in thread mittens, raking her gold pieces about here and there across the table, at the instigation of the wildest caprice, yet invariably doubling her stake, while the painstaking colonel as invariably lost his own; but it seemed to affect the latter not the least. He would only drum with his thin white fingers on the green cloth, arrange the bank-notes and gold remaining by his side, and put down the same stake in the same place, to be swept off in the same way as the rest.

Two or three non-playing spectators, and an Englishman with twenty thousand a year, who put a sovereign nervously down every now and then, but changed his mind and took it up before the game was closed, were the only other occupants of the table. Gerard kept silent for two deals, intently watching the cards; then he observed quietly to the croupier, "Cent louis—rouge."

It was a larger sum than the usual stakes at that particular table, but the croupier of course imperturbably pushed Gerard's two *rouleaux* to the place indicated, and in a minute's time the monotonous declaration, "Trente deux. Rouge gagne!" increased them by the same amount. He left the whole untouched for the next deal, and again red was the winner. Gerard had now a sum of four hundred napoleons on the table.

"A la masse?" inquired the croupier, observing no indication on the part of the player to withdraw or modify his stake.

"A la masse!" repeated the Englishman calmly. Black stopped at thirty-three, and the whole came into possession of the bank.

"Encore un coup!" said Gerard, smiling. "Cinq cent louis—noir!"

Unfortunately the cards seemed inclined to see-saw. The old Jewess had just pushed her venture across the table. Red won, and Gerard lost nearly five hundred pounds.

"This won't do," muttered the unsuccessful player in English. "Business is business. It serves me right for not getting to work in proper form."

Thus speaking, he entered the inner room, took a chair by the dealer, pushed a bill across the table, in return for which he was supplied with a quantity of bank-notes and gold, neatly done up in *rouleaux*. These represented his winnings at Baden-Baden, and indeed constituted his whole capital. Piling them systematically at his elbow, he took a card and a pin, glanced round as though to observe the

calibre of his associates against the common enemy, and so cleared boldly for action.

The others took little notice of him. They consisted of a Russian princess losing heavily behind a broad green fan; an English peer throwing the second fortune he had inherited after the first with perfect good-humour and *sang-froid*; two or three swindlers on a grand scale, not yet found out; and a dirty little man, of no particular nation, whose hat and cane were held by a tawdry, over-dressed, hard-featured, shrill-voiced Greek woman, and who was winning enormously with the air of being used to it. Indeed, if there is any truth in a well-known proverb and its converse, he looked as if he ought to be extremely successful at all games of chance.

It is needless to follow Gerard through the various ups and downs of an hour's play. At the end of forty minutes he was nearly cleaned out; the black, which it was his habit to back, winning more rarely than common. A happy inspiration then induced him to place a *rouleau* on the red. It came up—he left it there. Again! again! still his stake went on doubling itself.

He believed he had got into what gamblers call a *série*, and he made a little mental vow that if he could win six times running he would march off with his plunder, cut the whole thing, and return to England.

With considerable fortitude he left his increasing stake untouched. The fifth time red came up, his winnings amounted to sixteen hundred napoleons. To trust his luck successfully once more would be to land between two and three thousand pounds; and now, had Gerard proved himself a thorough gambler, his venture would have been crowned with success.

A thorough gambler has but two interests in the world—himself and his stake. These fill his whole heart, and there is no room for anything else. Whoever heard of his being influenced by such weakness as the perfume of a flower, the melody of a strain, or the sound of a once-loved voice?

Alas for Gerard! that old Lady Baker, drinking the waters at Homburg because her skin was growing yellow as a duck's bill, should have taken this particular opportunity of satisfying her thirst for general information, by entering the room in which the highest play in Europe was said to be carried on, and should have brought a companion with her—a pale, handsome, listless companion, on whom even her ladyship's losses at roulette—"Two double-frederics, my dear, and the same yesterday; I shall be in the Bench if ever

I reach home!"—made no impression; who was not even interested in the ball last night, the concert this evening, nor the balloon going up to-morrow; who little imagined she cared for anything at Homburg, except the railway carriage that would take her away, or that Gerard Ainslie was sitting within six feet of her, hidden by two stout German barons who stood behind his chair.

Lady Baker penetrated but a little way into the gambling-room. She had scarcely got her eye-glasses in position when the other pulled her back.

"It's very hot here," observed Mrs. Vandeleur; "and I detest the whole thing. Let us go out on the terrace." And the two ladies swept through a glass door into the open air.

It was a short sentence, but the full, low, characteristic tones leaped straight to Gerard's heart. With the start of a man who is shot, he rose to his feet, much to the astonishment of the imperturbable croupier over against him, but he forced himself to sit down again, though mechanically, like one in a dream. Mechanically, too, he pushed the whole of his large stake across the table into the compartment allotted to the other colour, and then watched the deal with open mouth and strange stupefied gaze. Black tried hard to win, for the numbers came up thirty-two, and even from those fireproof players rose the hushed stir and murmur of intense excitement; but the run was destined to continue yet once more, and the lower line of cards dealt for red stopped exactly at thirty-one!

Had it been otherwise, Gerard's inconsistent play would have been lauded for a master-stroke of strategy. As it turned out, the Russian princess, whose faith had been less unstable, simply muttered, "C'est un imbecile!" as she raked her own winnings together, with a contemptuous smile.

Gerard did not lack presence of mind; few men do who have led, even for a few months, such a life as his; and in less than a minute he had reflected calmly, not only on his own bad play, but on the absurdity of rushing out after Mrs. Vandeleur then and there, which had been his first impulse, when he might be quite sure of finding her, as anybody may be quite sure of finding anybody else in Homburg, at five or six different gatherings during the day. Therefore he collected his thoughts, counted the remnants of his capital, and summoned all his energies to retrieve his failure.

But Fortune is a jealous mistress, brooking no rival, and,

above all, intolerant of such an insult as Gerard's last inconstancy.

In a quarter of an hour he walked out on the *perron*, amongst blooming flowers and laughing children, without a florin left, to all intents and purposes an utterly ruined man.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WOMAN HE LOVED

AND it was not yet dinner-time! The whole thing had been done in less than an hour and a quarter! He was at his wits' end, no doubt. He had never before experienced anything like such "a facer" as this. And the worst part of it was that he must go back and tell Fanny the truth—tell her they had not a shilling left—tell her that unless she happened to find some loose change in her pocket, they could not even pay for their dinner at the *table d'hôte*. And yet will it be believed that a single drop could sweeten the whole of this bitter cup?—the mere chance, the possibility of seeing and speaking to Norah just once again!

He sought her in vain along the *perron*, up and down the terraces, round and round the gardens. Scores of handsome well-dressed women were strolling and loitering about, but Mrs. Vandeleur had gone home and was nowhere to be seen. This disappointment vexed him far more than his losses. He even found himself wondering with the wonder of someone else, as it seems to a man under strong excitement, that he should accept ruin so calmly, that everything real and tangible should thus count as nothing compared to a lost, hopeless, impossible love!

It was an ill-omened frame of mind in which to return home and consult his wife on what they should do next. No wonder the German servant he met in the passage, looking after him, shook her flaxen head, scared by the pale face and impatient gestures of the English *herr*, usually so bright, and cordial, and kind. No wonder Fanny, still radiant from Tourbillon's undeclared admiration, felt a presentiment of what was coming when Gerard entered their sitting-room with a bounce, and threw himself morosely, still gloved and hatted, into an armchair.

"That d——d Frenchman's been here again!" was the remark with which he opened the conversation. "The place smells like a hairdresser's shop!"

It was a vanity of Tourbillon's to affect some sweet and rare perfume of which the fragrance remained long after he had departed. Music, flowers, song, scent, and sentiment—all these were weapons of which he made judicious use at the proper time.

"The count *has* been here," answered Fanny, preparing for battle. "You needn't swear, Gerard, all the same."

"I beg your pardon," he replied bitterly. "You never were used to coarse language—never heard it, I should think, till you married *me*. It don't much matter now. You must be told the truth, and there's no time to pick and choose words, when the whole game is up!"

She was going to retort angrily, but something in his face stopped her.

"What truth?—what game?" said she, with clasped hands and anxious eyes. "What is it, Gerard? Tell me, dear. You're ill, I'm sure—or—or, you've lost more than you can pay?"

"A man can't well do that here!" he answered, with a grim smile. "Ready money seems to be the word with these foreigners, when you've got it. When you haven't, it's go to the devil whichever way you like, only don't be long about it! That's what I had best do, Fan. Look you here. It has come at last, and I haven't a shilling left in the world."

He hardened his face to meet the reproaches he expected, standing up and squaring his shoulders, with his hands in his pockets. It put him out of his calculations altogether, that she should run to him and throw her arms round his neck.

"I don't care," she sobbed, forgetting all her lady's language and good grammar. "I don't care—I don't care no more nor nothing! Never heed it, deary,—never fear! I'll work my fingers for you to the bone, I will! Only, you'll be my own now, won't you? My own lad, as you've never been afore."

He was touched, softened. He looked down into her eyes with tears in his own. But to be thus taken possession of, while Norah was not two hundred yards off—and in such language, too! It grated horribly. I believe if she had spoken good English, and left out the appropriation clause altogether, she might on this occasion have conquered once for all.

"It needn't be quite so bad as that," said he, putting her away from him gently and tenderly enough. "If I could get back to England, something surely might be done. But how to clear out from here! How to pay for the lodgings and be

allowed to leave the country, that is what puzzles me! Oh! what a fool I have been all through!"

That last sentence changed the whole current of her feelings. He had not met her as she wished. Her heart was getting sore again, and hardening every moment. She took her bonnet (such a sweet little bonnet, with one red rose at the side!) out of its drawer, and began to tie it on with trembling fingers, opposite the glass.

"You have been a fool, Gerard," she muttered. "Never a bigger fool than to-day! Ay! you've lost a deal more than money or money's worth, only you don't know it!" Then she turned on him with a fixed, resolute face, and said quite calmly—

"I'm going out for half an hour, Mr. Ainslie. I think, perhaps, I can be of service to you. Please hand me that parasol."

"Where are you going?" he asked carelessly; "isn't it near dinner-time?"

She smiled—a hard, pitiless smile, that seemed to spare neither herself nor him.

"I am going to get you what you want," she answered. "I can't promise, but I fancy I can bring you back the best part of a hundred pounds."

"You are going to ask your Frenchman for it, I suppose," said he, with a sneer. "Mrs. Ainslie, I've stood a good deal, but I will not stand that."

The hard smile deepened on her face.

"I am not going to ask my Frenchman, as you call him, for a shilling," was her reply. "When the time comes, perhaps his answer to such a request will be a kinder one than I've ever had from you," and looking straight in his face while she delivered this parting shot, the miller's daughter sailed out of the room like a queen.

Women certainly make themselves acquainted far more rapidly than men with the details of "the world they live in." How could Fanny have learned that the Vandeleurs were at Homburg? How could she be sure of meeting Mrs. Vandeleur on her way from the Louisen-Brünnen at this particular hour? Sawdor had certainly transferred his patient to Von Saufen-Kelch, and Von Saufen-Kelch's directions were to drink a glass of this sparkling mineral fasting, walk gently for half an hour, and then—drink another. But how could Mrs. Ainslie tell that Norah would so scrupulously follow the honest German's simple prescription? Whatever might be the basis of Fanny's calculations, they

were so correct that in less than ten minutes she met the very person she wanted within twenty paces of the spring.

There was no mistaking that lithe, undulating figure at any distance off. We must be allowed a sporting simile sometimes—Mrs. Vandeleur looked like a racehorse amongst hacks in every company she frequented, in none more than when surrounded by the élite of a London drawing-room. Now, as she was coming up the gravelled pathway, Fanny could not but acknowledge the grace of that tall, slender figure, with its gliding, snake-like ease of movement; the charm of that small, well-poised head, with its delicate temples, its golden chestnut hair, its pale, chiseled features, and deep, dark, melancholy eyes.

As the women met each other, face to face, Mrs. Ainslie had the advantage of being prepared for the encounter; Norah, on the contrary, was exceedingly startled and disturbed.

She had not seen Fanny since their well-remembered interview in the Rectory garden. She had thought of her indeed very often, and always with mingled feelings not devoid of that tender, though painful interest which a woman's heart can still take in any object, even a successful rival, connected with the man she must no longer love. Being a well-conducted person, in a certain position, Mrs. Vandeleur's better judgment should of course have decided on keeping such an adventuress as Fanny at a distance, but Norah's character possessed a little Bohemian tinge of its own. She was not without sympathy for a recklessness prompted by affection, of which she felt herself quite capable under similar temptation. Though she hated Fanny for running away with the man they both loved, it was with an honest, open hatred that did not prevent admiration for her daring, even something akin to respect for her success.

Altogether, if time had been given for consideration, she would probably have determined on meeting Mrs. Ainslie with the cold, formal greeting of a distant acquaintance; but time was not given, for the latter came on her almost too quickly for recognition, and with considerable tact under the circumstances plunged at once *in medias res*.

"Oh! Miss Welby, Miss Welby!" said Fanny in a broken voice, and seizing Norah's hands in her own, "I ask your pardon indeed, for I should say Mrs. Vandeleur, but things are so changed now with you and me. And we're ruined!—we are! We haven't a penny to bless ourselves left, and never a friend in this foreign country but yourself,

Miss Welby—I mean Mrs. Vandeleur; and if you won't help us, I'm sure I don't know what to do no more than a child—I don't! I don't!"

"Ruined!" repeated Norah, shocked, and, it must be admitted, utterly taken aback by so unexpected an ebullition. "Ruined, Fanny!" (she could not quite bring herself to say Mrs. Ainslie). "My good girl, what do you mean? Has anything happened to your husband?" (Here her voice faltered a little.) "Is it sorrow, or sickness, or what is it? Of course, I'll help you if I can."

Fanny carried the shapely well-gloved hand she held up to her lips. Impulsive, impressionable, a natural actress, she threw herself unreservedly into the sentiment of the moment, and if such a paradox is admissible, could be sincere even in her duplicity.

"I knew you would," she murmured, her fine eyes filling with real tears; "I knew you would. I haven't forgotten what a kind heart you always had. It's money we want, Mrs. Vandeleur; money to take us back to England. We haven't so much as a florin left to get us a dinner!"

The tears had come to Norah's blue eyes too, and for a moment Fanny's heart smote her to meet so kindly a sympathy; but it hardened again directly with the jealousy that survives in such hearts, long after love is dead, for Norah exclaimed all unconsciously—

"You don't mean that Gerard—that Mr. Ainslie is starving! Gracious heavens! and I to know nothing of it! You mustn't stay a minute! You must go to him directly. Tell me at once. How much money do you want?"

Fanny reflected. "A hundred pounds," said she, "would take us to England and set us up again. At least, would put us in the way of getting a livelihood."

"A hundred pounds only!" echoed Norah, with that glorious contempt for a hundred pounds entertained by every woman who does not know what it is to live on her own resources, and by a good many who do. "You shall have it directly. Come with me this instant. The idea of poor Gerard having no dinner for want of a hundred pounds!"

She had forgotten all about his folly, his inconstancy, and even his wife, though the latter was walking by her side; forgotten everything but that her Gerard, whom she used so to love, was starving, and she could help him. But could she help him? The doubt came on her like the shock of a shower-bath. Mrs. Vandeleur's stock of ready money was usually at a low ebb; in fact, she seldom wanted any. The

servants always had change, and Mr. Vandeleur paid all her bills, to do him justice, without a murmur, though they were of no trifling amount, Norah being inclined to carelessness on such matters,—so that really she seldom found occasion to put her hand in her pocket. To-day she knew she had one florin in a ridiculous little porte-monnaie she insisted on carrying about, because she had given its fellow to the girl at the well. This was the whole of her capital. She remembered there was neither kreutzer, nor groschen, nor sou, nor halfpenny, nor any denomination of coin, foreign or British, in the jewel-case at home. Stay! The jewel-case! Might not jewels help her out here, as effectually as gold? She glanced down to her shapely arm; at its wrist dangled a bracelet, in which were set two or three precious stones of undoubted value—a trinket, not in the best taste, but worth a good deal of money: one of Vandeleur's many gifts since her marriage. Surely this was the very thing.

"In here, Fanny!" she exclaimed, hurrying her companion into a flashy little shop, or rather stall, displaying beads, crystals, drinking-cups, views of the Taunus, rubbish for all tastes, and cheap jewellery of every description.

In a moment her bracelet was dashed on the counter, and under inspection by a German Jew, with a dim gold ring on a dirty forefinger, who shook his head depreciatingly, of course, as he would have shaken it by instinct if requested to advance a hundred florins on the Koh-i-noor diamond.

It was no novelty to this cautious speculator thus to examine feminine personalties. Everybody in Homburg passed his shop five or six times a day, and he was in the hourly habit of pricing all kinds of articles at one-third of their market-value, and even giving for them as much as half. A kind little man, too, in manner, and a friendly, notwithstanding his faith, his profession, and his grimy hands.

Mrs. Vandeleur was always a little impetuous. "There!" said she in her native language—"take that; the stones are real, and it's good gold. Give me a hundred pounds sterling for it—and be quick."

He spoke English, of course, in his own way, as he spoke half a dozen European tongues. Poising the bracelet in his hand, he looked blandly into Norah's face, and observed—

"A hundred gulden, honourable lady—a hundred gulden (mintz), or you shall have your English money at 11. 48, the rate of exchange this morning in Frankfort, and—and—," observing the cloud on his customer's brow, "anything else you like out of my shop, for an *andenken*, honourable lady.

There is *bric-a-brac* and French clocks, and ver' goot Turkish shawls behind there, and slippers, and amber, *und so weiter, und so weiter,*" bowing lower and looking more persuasive with every fresh enumeration.

"One hundred pounds!" repeated Norah, shutting her lips tight, as was her habit when very much in earnest. "It's worth more than two, I know. Take it, or leave it! There's another shop three doors lower down."

"Fifty, honourable lady. Sixty—seventy!" expostulated the buyer, increasing his bid every time he looked at Mrs. Vandeleur's unyielding face. "Eighty and five! Well, well, to favour a gracious and honourable lady, let us say a hundred, and ten guldens thrown back. Not a florin! Not a kreutzer! Ah! be it so. Bot I sall gain nozing, *gar nichts*, ven I send him to Frankfort to be sold"; and the old fellow counted out the money in French and German paper with an admirable assumption of combining the courtesy due to a lady with the satisfaction of performing a charitable action.

Norah crumpled it all up together and left the shop, scarce deigning to return a nod for the many bows and entreaties for her future custom, with which the little man ushered her out.

No sooner was she in the street than she pushed the packet into Mrs. Ainslie's hands. "Take it, Fanny," she said, "and welcome. Heartily welcome! Only," and here her eyes looked wild, and her voice came as if she were choking, "whatever happens, don't—don't tell him that it comes from me!"

They were close to her own door, and dropping her veil over her face, she ran in without another word. Mr. Vandeleur had got tired of waiting, and gone off to dinner. Therefore it is reasonable to suppose that Norah would go at once to her own room, and soothe her feelings with the refreshment of "a good cry."

CHAPTER XXV

THE WOMAN HE MARRIED

FANNY looked after her long and earnestly for more than a minute. Then the face, usually so soft and rosy turned hard and pale.

"She loves him!" muttered Mrs. Ainslie, clenching the soiled notes in her gloved hand; "she loves my husband—loves him still! Ay! and the right way too. I think I know how a woman should care for a man! I wonder what *he* feels about it? I'll find out before I'm an hour older. It's time something was done, and if it's as I think, why, he'll live to repent it, perhaps, that's all! I'm not the woman to be deceived and put upon, I can tell my lord! There's others besides him, just as good gentlefolks, too, that can look sweet and speak kind. Ah! a worm will turn upon you if you'll only tread hard enough; and I ain't quite a worm yet—very far from it!"

Thus Mrs. Ainslie, looking, indeed, very unlike a worm in her pretty dress and her sparkling beauty, that even an angry face could not wholly destroy. She had not far to go, perhaps scarcely a quarter of a mile, but into that short walk Fanny compressed the reflections and the possibilities of a lifetime. She reviewed her own past, but only since she had known Gerard; previous to that era it seemed well to ignore, even to herself, the habits and inclinations of her girlhood. She went back to the first day they met in the sweet early summer under the willows by Ripley Water, but the tears began to gather, and she forced herself not to dwell too long on that memorable walk. Even with its golden recollections was mingled the alloy of Miss Welby's presence, and Fanny could have cursed the fair, white face that had thus come always between her and happiness—wilfully forgetting that but for Miss Welby's rare beauty and Vandeleur's unscrupulous spirit of intrigue, she had never so much as made the acquaintance of the man who was now her husband.

Neither did she like to think too much of the happy time,

despite its keen anxiety, when he lay between life and death, and she had him to herself, to watch and tend and love, with trembling hopes and fears, in sweet uncertainty whether that love would ever be returned. How well she remembered the day when he came back from the confines of death to eat his chicken-broth like a living man, when, weakened by watching and anxiety, she burst into tears from sheer pleasure at the sight. Oh for that happy time once more! and now it could never, never come again!

She could have wept freely, but that something fierce in Fanny's nature, a spirit of rebellion against pain, always came to the surface under suffering; and a reactionary sentiment of pity for herself, such as she would have felt for another, ere she had time to melt, hardened her back into wrath. He had never loved her, she thought—not even when he took her to his breast that day. It was only gratitude, that was all, and a young man's fancy for a pretty face. She had a pretty face, she knew it; and there were others thought so besides him. She would have made him a good wife, perhaps, if he had let her, but he never would let her; and after all, maybe, it wasn't in her nature to be steady for long. What was the use of trying to be good? It certainly hadn't answered with her. Best take things as they come, and "so let the world jog along as it will."

"And that there Frenchman," continued Fanny, pursuing her meditations half aloud, "he'd take me away to-morrow and welcome, if I was only to hold up my finger! And why shouldn't I hold up my finger? It wouldn't break Gerard's heart. I don't believe he'd even go to the station to ask what train I'd started by. And the other's a real gentleman after all—a nobleman, as I believe; and I do think he loves the very ground I walk on. Is a girl never to have a home? never to know the worth of an honest man's affection? It's not been mine yet, but I should like to try. Gerard had better look out. If he don't alter his conduct he'll find the cage open and the bird flown. Ah! it's not the bird that he wants in his own nest. She's got gilt wires round her, and perhaps she beats her breast against them harder than any of us think for. Dear! dear! it's a bad business altogether, and if it don't get better I'm in two minds whether I won't take French leave. French leave, indeed! if the count will chance it, why, so will I. I've done a good stroke of business to-day, at anyrate. I wonder whether Gerard will think so? At least, I've done it for him. I wonder whether any other woman would have done half as much? It wasn't so easy to

ask her for charity. What could I do? Vandeleur? I know him too well. He said that cheque should be the last; and when the squire won't, why he won't—not if you was gasping for a mouthful of bread at his feet. Well, Gerard, it's about done at last, lad; but perhaps you and me will part friends after all!"

She had reached their lodgings now, and ascended the stairs with some vague unacknowledged hope that she might have judged her husband too harshly. Perhaps he had got over his infatuation about Mrs. Vandeleur, another man's wife and all! thought Fanny. Perhaps it was but a boy's fancy, and he had forgotten it, as men do forget such youthful weaknesses—men and women too: she had buried a dozen of them, and even their ghosts never rose to disturb her now. Well, a few minutes would show. She could love him yet, for all that was come and gone, if he would but give her the chance.

He was sitting in an arm-chair, plunged in gloomy thought, with his eyes fixed on the empty stove. His hat was still on his head; he had not even taken off his gloves. Whatever might be the subject of his meditations, at least it was engrossing. He did not even hear her come into the room.

Twenty-four hours ago she would have stolen behind him and laid her hand on his shoulder—perhaps turned his face up and given it a saucy kiss. She was too proud to do so now, but placing herself directly in his front, observed coldly, and in a tone little calculated to conciliate—

"I am sorry to disturb you, Mr. Ainslie, but I have been about your business, and have done, I think, as much as you could wish."

He gave a great start. He was dreaming of Marston Rectory—the roses, the cedar-tree, the lawn, the work-table, the slender girlish figure, the fond pale face, with its dark eyes and its golden chestnut hair. He woke to Homburg, ruin, and an exasperated wife; beautiful indeed and brilliant of complexion, but hard, indignant, bearing on her forehead the well-known frown that denoted a domestic storm at hand.

"*My* business?" he asked shortly; "I didn't know I had any! Nor pleasure neither, for the matter of that!"

"You needn't sneer," she replied, commanding herself with an effort, though the dark eyes flashed ominously. "So long as I remain with you, so long as I fulfil my duty as a wife, your interests are mine. I have been looking after them to-day. Count that money, sir. Oh! I'm not going to

cheat you. If I'm right you'll find it exactly a hundred pounds!"

He was so surprised that he never thought of telling over the notes she held out, not even taking them from her hand. He stared blankly in his wife's face.

"A hundred pounds!" said he. "Why? what? how do you mean? Fanny, how could you ever come by a hundred pounds?"

Rather a hard smile lightened in her dark eyes, and showed her white teeth, while she answered—

"That's my business; yours is to take and do the best you can with it. I'm not such a fool, Gerard, after all, though I hadn't the luck to be a lady born."

He winced. Somehow she always said the very thing that irritated him most. It is no unusual drawback to married life, this same knack of rubbing the hair the wrong way; and I think it helps to bring a very large proportion of cases into the Court of Probate, etc.

"At least," said he, after a moment's pause, "I have a right to know where this comes from. You never had a hundred pounds of your own in your life, Fanny; nor anything worth a hundred pounds!"

"Not yet," she answered, with an impatient little tap of her foot against the floor. "But as the count says, 'Qui sait enfin ce qui arrivera?'"

The atrocious British accent of this quotation grated on his ear less than the mention of the count's name.

"I have a right to know, Fanny," he repeated in a stern commanding tone, against which she was sure to rebel. "I desire you will tell me the truth at once."

"Then I just won't!" she answered, remembering Norah's stipulation, and thirsting for battle on her own account, wounded as she felt in her better feelings, and falling more and more under the dominion of her worse.

When a woman takes up such a position it is somewhat difficult to dislodge her. The only chance is that she seldom holds it for any length of time, abandoning it usually for the shelter of some grievance, real or imaginary.

"I can come to but one conclusion, then," said Gerard, mounting the high horse. "It must have been furnished by Count Tourbillon, and I decline to have anything to do with it—or with you either, after to-day!"

She turned perfectly white in her anger now. She had enough of right she felt on her side to justify any outbreak of temper, any breach of confidence. She forgot her promise to

Norah, she forgot her duty to her husband, forgot everything but the bitter, cruel insult under which she writhed.

"It is not from Count Tourbillon!" she exclaimed; "and you are a base coward to say it is! I have it in charity—charity—from your old sweetheart! It's from Mrs. Vandeleur—there! Perhaps you'll take it now; for I do believe as you worship the very ground she walks on!"

He covered his face with his hands.

"God knows I do!" was all he murmured.

It was too much for Fanny. That stricken look, that sorrowing voice, that muttered confession, wrung by surprise and suffering, proved more than a thousand protestations. She saw it all, and it pierced her like a knife.

With a gesture of intense irritation she flung the little crumpled-up bundle of notes at her husband's head, swept out of the room, banging the door fiercely behind her, and walked downstairs without trusting herself to say another word.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RULING PASSION

ERARD, left alone with his own reflections, sat for a while in a brown study opposite the stove. By degrees the past came back in regular succession, like the scenes of a diorama, or rather faint and distorted as on the slides of a magic-lantern. It was with a thrill of something akin to actual happiness that he considered his utter ruin, for had it not brought him the assurance that he still lived in Norah's memory, nay, that he still occupied some portion of a heart once wholly his own? For a moment, I say, he was almost happy. Then came the self-torture to which such dispositions are peculiarly subject; the misgivings from which coarser organisations, secure in their own good opinion, are wholly free; the morbid depreciation of its real value, so often entertained by an engrossing affection acting on a sensitive and imaginative temperament, not yet experienced in the selfishness of mankind, and ignorant how rare, and consequently how precious, is an honest, undivided love, adulterated by no considerations of interest or vanity or advancement. He remembered now the painful longing, the weary waiting in his comfortless lodgings for the letter that never came. Would he have done so by her? Not to save his life a hundred times! No; she could not really have loved him. Had she not given the clearest possible proof of her indifference? Was she not another man's wife? The haughty, happy wife of an affectionate husband, willing and rich enough to indulge her in every fancy and every whim? To help her old lover with a sum of money she did not want, as you throw your dog scraps from your plate at luncheon, seemed to be the last caprice; and was her dog to take it with servile, grateful gestures, and mild, fawning eyes? Her

faithful dog, once ready to face death itself willingly for one caressing wave of the white hand, one kind look in the blue eyes! No; he would be a dog indeed, if he could accept such an indignity from the woman who had trodden his heart under foot without compunction or remorse! Stung by the thoughts, he rose from his chair, and picked the notes off the floor where they lay as Fanny had thrown them down. He would send them back to Mrs. Vandeleur that very afternoon. It would be an excuse at least for writing—only a few lines, expressing gratitude, of course, but cold, polite, and with a covert bitterness in every word that should cut her false heart to the quick! Instinctively he examined the roll and counted over the notes; with the addition of a few napoleons enclosed, the sum amounted to exactly a hundred pounds. While he told them over, a temptation came strong upon him to take them back to her himself; through much pride and sorely wounded feelings rose the unconquerable thirst to hear that well-known voice, to look in that dear face once again—the longing that has saved many a heart from shipwreck, as it has lured many another to destruction.

There is a story in one of our ancient romances exemplifying the mastery of this ill-advised "desire of the eyes," even in extremity of mortal danger, which is not without a moral, though couched in a grim pathetic humour of its own. Rendered into modern English, it runs almost as follows:—

"Now, the king held a tournament, and caused heralds to proclaim that at high noon the Knight of the Falcon would give battle to all comers, by sound of trumpet; to run three courses with thrust of lance, and exchange three sword strokes, point and edge, in honour of the king's betrothed bride, whom none had yet seen, for she was coming to share his throne from her father's castle beyond the Northern Sea. And if any knight would uphold that his ladye-love was aught but sun-burned in comparison with this unknown damsel, he must accept mortal defiance from the challenger, and so give him battle *à outrance*. Therefore the Knight of the Falcon hung his shield under the gallery, where sat the king surrounded by his nobles and their dames; but because it was the shield of a famous warrior, with whom issue must be tried, not by weapons of courtesy but to the death, men passed it by untouched, and it seemed that the beauty of the unknown queen would be established in a bloodless victory.

"So the heralds blew their trumpets loudly, and some of the ladies in the king's gallery whispered that their brows must indeed be sun-burned, since their lovers had grown so

sparing of lance-shaft and sword-blade; but the Lady Elinor laughed scornfully, and said to her companions, 'Behold, though my knight is under a vow that he will neither speak in my presence, nor look in my face, till Pentecost be come and past, yet will he adventure man and horse, life and limb, to uphold mine honour this day, as ye shall see before the heralds shall have sounded one more trumpet blast.'

"Even while she spoke, Sir Eglamor, called, after his vow, 'the Silent Knight,' rode lightly into the lists, and struck his lance-point fair and free against the hanging shield till it rang again, but spake never a word the while, and though his vizor was up, kept his eyes fixed on the mailed gauntlets at his saddle-bow, because of his vow and his ladye-love, who looked down on him from the gallery above. Nevertheless, the blood came bright and glowing into his face, so that the Lady Elinor thought her knight had never seemed so fair as when he clasped his vizor, and wheeled his horse to his post, and laid his lance knightly in the rest.

"So the trumpets sounded, and the knights ran three courses, shivering their lances to the grasp without advantage lost or won on either side. Wherefore they drew their good swords, and laid on with mighty strokes for honour and renown.

"Now the Knight of the Falcon pressed his adversary sore, and drove him to the barriers, and plied him with sweeping blade under the king's gallery; but the Silent Knight spied a crevice beneath the other's vaunt-brace, and drew back his arm to speed a deadly thrust that should win for Lady Elinor the victory.

"She was leaning over to watch him, and beholding her knight as it seemed to her thus at disadvantage, she turned deadly pale, uttering a faint scream of pity and terror and dismay.

"Then the Silent Knight forgot his vow, and his skill of arms, and his sore need in mortal strife, to look up once again in the pale scared face he loved so well. Once again, and never more! for the whirling blade came crashing down, and shore through floating plume and good steel helmet, and bit deep into the skull, so that the Silent Knight fell heavily beneath the trampling horses; and when his squire ran in to unclasp his vizor, he neither spoke nor lifted his eyes nor moved again.

"Said the Lady Elinor, 'Alas, for my true knight! that even in his mortal peril he could not refrain his eyes from

this poor face. Never shall it be unveiled in the sight of men again!'

"So she kept her vow till nigh Pentecost twelvemonth, and knights and dames declared that the Lady Elinor had mourned for her true love right maidenly and well."

In obedience, then, to the dictate of this morbid craving, Gerard sallied forth to traverse the gardens of the Kursaal, with the hope of seeing Mrs. Vandeleur once more. It was improbable that his search would be successful, inasmuch as the hour had arrived at which it was the habit of those visitors to go to dinner, who preserved the customs of civilised life, and felt unequal to a heavy German meal of five courses at one o'clock. He walked up one alley and down another without seeing a human being, except the tidy, prosperous, essentially Saxon maiden who presided over the Louisen-Brünnen, and whose smile was sweet, whose blue eyes were placid, as if there were no such things as aching hearts or broken fortunes in the world. She only nodded pleasantly in answer to his inquiring glances, reached him a mug of the sparkling water, and, unmoved by his refusal, went on calmly with her knitting as before.

He could not bring himself to call at Vandeleur's house and ask point-blank if Norah was at home, so he was easily persuaded she must have gone to dinner at the crowded *table-d'hôte* in the Kursaal, and there was nothing for it but to wait till that protracted meal should come to an end. He thought once of joining the two hundred feasters, but he could not have eaten a morsel to save his life. Besides—and the reflection was a little startling—he had not a farthing of money in his pocket, except that hundred of Norah's which he had resolved not to touch. So he thought he would walk to and fro amongst the poplars, and revolve what he should say to her when they did meet, conducting in his own mind an impassioned dialogue conveying sentiments of unaltered affection on both sides, based on an imaginary avowal from the lady which it was most improbable she would make.

He was getting on remarkably well in his own opinion, and had forgotten the existence of Vandeleur, and even Fanny, as completely as if he were still Mr. Archer's pupil speeding across the flats to Marston Rectory, when a little cloud that had gathered on the brows of the Taunus dissolved into a gentle summer shower, before it could reach the Maine. Not an idler but himself was out of doors, and, seeing it must pass over in a few minutes, he took

shelter in one of the roulette-rooms opening on the *perron* of the Kursaal.

The game, though languishing, was not without a few supporters. The ball clicked at intervals into its numbered pigeon-holes, and the drowsy voice of the croupier was to be heard with its "rouge-pair, et passe," or its "rien ne va plus," in monotonous succession. A few shabby-looking players, who had dined early, or could not afford to dine at all, stalked round the table, like unquiet spirits; and the stakes were so modest that when zero turned up in favour of the bank it only netted seventeen florins and one napoleon of doubtful metal, not much resembling gold.

With the instinct of habit, and scarce aware of what he was about, Gerard placed one of his louis, lately the property of Mrs. Vandeleur, on that column of the board which comprised what are termed the "middle numbers," from 13 to 25 inclusive. The ball ran into a compartment marked 17, and according to the rules of the game he won double his stake. Such encouragement to the venture of a professed gambler could have but one result. He saw before him the possibility of winning a large stake, of returning Norah the hundred pounds she had sent him, and of assuring her that, while he was not indebted to her a farthing, she had been his good angel, and had preserved him from utter penury and want. A second hazard was equally successful, and Gerard cast himself blindly into the arms of that goddess in whom he had lately accustomed himself implicitly to trust. She failed him, as she so often fails her votaries, when they have none to rely on but herself. After an hour of gnawing anxiety and suspense, that left its traces on his features months afterwards, Gerard for the second time within a few hours walked out upon the *perron* literally beggared to the uttermost farthing. Nay, worse than this; he had lost more than food and shelter, more than the necessaries of life. How could he ever look Mrs. Vandeleur in the face again?

His eyes vacant and abstracted, face bloodless, hands thrust deep into empty pockets, coat buttoned, and hat pushed back, he walked with something of a drunkard's wavering step and gesture in the direction of his home. There seems implanted in human nature that instinct of the wild animal which prompts the hopeless, helpless sufferer to seek its own lair, there to lie down and die. Gerard Ainslie staggered back to his "apartment of four pieces" aimlessly and unconsciously, as the hurt wolf slinks to its den, or the sinking fox makes for the woodland in which he was bred.

It was not till his hand touched the door that another pang came across him, as he remembered his wife, and wondered "what he should say to Fanny!"

He had forgotten their late difference now—forgotten her irritating ways, her want of refinement in manner—forgotten even her low birth and his own lost chances—forgotten everything but that she had beauty, and loved him, and had fought gallantly by his side through the ups and downs of their short married life; nay, that even now she would not offer a reproach, but would probably try to please him more than ever, because he was completely undone. She had courage, he remembered; she had energy and resource; but what plan could she hit upon now? or how should he excuse the imbecile recklessness and folly of this last fatal proceeding?

Poor Gerard! He need not have troubled himself on that score. Entering the sitting-room, he could not fail to observe that the box which contained Fanny's favourite finery was absent from its accustomed corner. There was no work on the sofa, and no work-basket, while the fan she usually left by the flower-stand had disappeared; but on the table lay a letter, addressed to himself, in the clear, formal handwriting he had often jested with her for taking so much pains to acquire. I think he knew the truth before he opened it. I think amongst all the mingled feelings called up by its perusal, one of thankfulness for a sense of liberty predominated. It was short, frank enough in all conscience, and very much to the point:—

"I have quitted you," it told him, "once for all. I am never coming back again, and will never ask to see you any more. Gerard, I wouldn't have gone like this if I hadn't left you something to keep you from starving. I feel bad enough; don't think me worse than I am. And I wouldn't have deserted you at all, only you don't love me!—that's enough; I'm not a-going to say another word. Perhaps I'd have made you a good wife if you'd behaved different; but I don't bear malice. I'd say 'God bless you!' if I thought a blessing of mine could do anybody anything but harm. Good-bye, Gerard! I hope you'll be happier some day with somebody else than you've ever been with me.

"FANNY."

So Gerard found himself without a wife, without friends, without money; outraged, insulted, ruined, lonely, desolate—but free.

CHAPTER XXVII

DISAGREEABLE

IT is time to return to Mr. Vandeleur, who, like most men of his age, considered dinner no unimportant item in the day's programme, and protested vigorously against anything being suffered to interfere with that important function. It is only very young people, I imagine, who boast they can live upon love—though how so light a diet supplies the wants of a growing appetite I am at a loss to comprehend. John Vandeleur could still find pleasure in the glance of a bright eye, the accents of a sweet voice; yet was he none the less susceptible to the fascinations of four courses and a dessert, washed down by a bottle of Mumm's champagne, if no better could be got, a cup of clear coffee, and a *chasse* of curaçoa. The humours of a *table-d'hôte* also amused him not a little, provided he had somebody to join in his mirth; and he was very proud of the admiring glances elicited by Norah's handsome face and figure from connoisseurs of various nations, when she entered a crowded *salle* to take her place at the long glittering table, with its glass, fruit, flowers, trumpery, and tinsel, all exceedingly pleasing to the eye. Moreover, he was hungry after his walk on the Taunus; therefore he waited impatiently in the sitting-room for five or ten minutes, ere he went and tapped at his wife's door.

Mrs. Vandeleur, knowing her red eyelids would not bear inspection, had locked herself in.

"Who's there?" she demanded sharply from inside.

"We shall be very late," he said, "if you're not ready. Hadn't I better order dinner at home?"

She longed for an hour's quiet; she thirsted for ever so short a space of time to herself, to do battle with, and gain the mastery over, her own heart; so she answered a little impatiently—

"I'm not coming—I don't want any dinner—I'm not hungry. Go on, and never mind me."

"No dinner, Norah?" replied her husband in a tone of

surprise and concern. "Are you not well, darling? Can't I get you anything? Shall I send after Von Saufen-Kelch?—I saw him pass just now."

Her heart smote her sore. Why couldn't she love him? He was so kind and considerate; so anxious if she was ill, so forbearing when she was cross. Though ungovernable with others, he was always a gentleman to her. And she could scarce return him even common gratitude for his devotion. She forced herself to speak in terms of kindness and affection.

"Don't be anxious, dear," she answered, without rising from the bed on which she lay. "I'm only tired, and I have got a little headache. An hour's quiet will take it away. Go to dinner without me; I shall be all right when you come back."

But she shuddered, and turned her wet face to the pillows, while his step died out along the passage. Could she go on bearing this? Must it always be thus? Was her whole life to be a lie?

Then she thanked Heaven that she had been able to help Gerard at his need, and made a firm resolution never to see him, nor hear from him, nor so much as even *think* of him again, and prayed that strength might be given her to keep it till the end.

John Vandeleur, a little disappointed, walked off to feed with two hundred of his fellow-creatures at the crowded *table-d'hôte* of the Kursaal. A knot of French women, vivacious in language and agreeable in manners, looked after him with approving glances as he passed, considering him, no doubt, a creditable specimen of the middle-aged, manly, well-dressed English gentleman; and one even observed, loud enough for him to overhear—"Tiens! Coralie, il est bien, ce vieillard. Pour un Anglais bien entendu!" To which Coralie, whose teeth would bear inspection, only replied by a sarcastic grin.

Something seemed to be gnawing at his heart, though, while he threaded the crowds of well-dressed, handsome women who were thronging towards the *table-d'hôte*; something that would keep reminding him how the path he had elected to follow was slipping from beneath his feet; how the life he had chosen was passing away, to leave nothing but a vague impotent regret in its place. Once, not so long ago, he would have enjoyed such a scene, as the butterfly enjoys the summer-garden where it may disport itself at will. Now he could not even wish that time would come again. Like the mortal in fairyland whose eyes had

been touched with a magic liquid that rendered powerless the elfin glamour, he seemed to see gaunt skeletons and grinning skulls beneath winning smiles and graceful, undulating dresses. He had come up with the *mirage* at last, and discovered that those golden lakes and gardens of Paradise were but barren sand and scorching glare. Was there only one fountain to quench his insufferable thirst, and must that be sealed to him for evermore? His brain swam, and he turned sick and cold, but the man had lots of pluck, and soon rallied—swaggering into the long lofty *salle* with his accustomed air of easy good-humoured superiority, though he said to himself he was "about done" all the same.

"I've been through everything else," thought Vandeleur, "but I've never taken to drinking. I used to think fellows fools who did. Well, I'm learning some queer lessons now. Perhaps it's the only thing left after all!"

Nevertheless, he was so loyal to his young wife, shut up weeping in her room, that he went and sat by old Lady Baker, who usually found a vacant place at her elbow—something in her brown wig and general demeanour deterring strangers from a near approach, until compelled to face that ordeal by the pangs of hunger and the exigencies of a crowded table.

"Where's Norah? Why didn't you bring her?" asked this tiresome old woman in the loud voice deaf people, as being mindful of the golden rule, seem invariably to use.

"Got a headache," answered Vandeleur in the same key, arranging his napkin, and commencing on a plate of thick vermicelli soup.

"Headache! Nonsense!" answered Lady Baker, and by this time their stentorian colloquy had raised some score of heads on each side of the table from the congenial employment of eating, while Vandeleur wished he was sitting anywhere else. "That's only the waters. I tell you the Louisen-Brünnen would give my poodle a headache if it was to do him any good. Why didn't you make her come? What's the use of your marrying a young wife if you don't take her about and amuse her? She looks mopped to death. What's that? Beef? Merci, no thank ye. Mr. Vandeleur, will you hand the *wein-karte*?"

Vandeleur had ordered a bottle of champagne. While Lady Baker wavered between the merits of Beaune and Medoc, he had time to fortify himself with a glass or two of that exhilarating compound, but his communicative neighbour was soon at him again.

"Tell Norah I've such a piece of news for her," she shouted in his ear: "I've seen her old love on the terrace. It's as true as I sit here. And he is playing, I can tell you, as if his pockets were lined with gold. You remember young Ainslie, the lad who was at Mr. Archer's, not above two miles from Oakover?"

Remember young Ainslie! He rather thought he did; and the recollections scarce improved the flavour of that last gulp of champagne ere he filled again so rapidly. But John Vandeleur was a match for a good many Lady Bakers still, and he laughed carelessly while he replied—

"Playing is he? That won't last long. I'm sorry for it. I used to think him a nice boy, and he was a great favourite of Norah's; but I'm afraid he's gone regularly to the bad."

"You may well say so," proclaimed Lady Baker; "I can tell you more than that; I can tell you what's become of that odious woman he married. I can tell you who she's gone off with. Ah! it's a sad business. Ain't you dying to know?"

Here an English mamma, with two gaunt daughters not out of earshot, half rose from her seat, as about to take refuge in flight; but observing the approach of tempting *soufflé*, and unwilling, perhaps, to lose the germ of a fragrant scandal, contented herself with frowning in a rebuking manner at her offspring, and remaining very upright in her place.

Lady Baker continued:—

"I never thought much of that Count Tourbillon, you know. I told you myself you shouldn't introduce him to your wife, and I'm thankful now I did. Well, I sent my maid out, before I went to dress, for half a yard of sarsnet. Will you believe, Mr. Vandeleur, that there wasn't such a thing to be got as half a yard of sarsnet, without writing to Frankfort for it! And what do you think she saw?"

"The Frankfort omnibus empty," answered Vandeleur, refilling his glass, "and the English clergyman's children in a donkey-chair! that's about the usual excitement here."

"Nonsense," replied her ladyship; "you can see that any day. No; what my maid saw was a fiacre, loaded with luggage, and driven towards the railway-station, with a foreign servant on the box, and inside Count Tourbillon, accompanied by"—here the English mamma stretched her long neck to listen, while her demure daughters coloured with suppressed delight—"by Mrs. Ainslie! There, Mr. Vandeleur! Have I opened your eyes, or have I not?"

If she had, Vandeleur was most unlikely to admit it. Calling for a glass of Madeira, he answered calmly—

"What a good riddance for Ainslie! Now the weight is taken off, it is just possible he may get a fresh start, and make a race of it after all."

"That's so like a man!" answered her ladyship, with a grim smile and a playful shake of her brown wig; "you never think of us. Have you no pity for the poor woman who has fallen into the hands of your friend? Yes, your friend, that good-for-nothing Count Tourbillon?"

Vandeleur's laugh was harsh and grating. "Pity!" replied he; "who that knows anything about them ever pitied a woman! Like the tiger-cat, they can take care of themselves. Tourbillon understands them thoroughly. He wages war with the whole sex—war to the knife!—and he's quite right. I'll tell you what, Lady Baker; I'll pity you if ever you fall into his clutches, but nobody else. Garçon! Encore un verre de madère."

He spoke in a loud, almost a brutal tone, quite unlike his usual voice, and even Lady Baker's dull senses perceived the difference. She looked a little surprised, while the English mamma, with a sign to her daughters, walked grandly and reproachfully away. To be sure, dinner was over and there was nothing to stay for now; nor could she expect to hear so good a piece of scandal during the next twenty-four hours. Was it not her duty, therefore, to impart it without delay, to certain female friends of her own nation, with whom she was engaged to a British cup of tea, while the rest of the company went to drink coffee outside, where they could sit in the glow of the warm evening and enjoy the strains of such a band as is never heard out of doors but in Germany?

Vandeleur lit a cigar, and took his place to listen, but the sweet, sad, wailing melody of the waltz they were playing irritated him strangely, and seemed to call up all kinds of morbid uncomfortable feelings in his mind. He had become very restless of late, and seldom remained long in any one spot. He thought he would walk about a little, while he finished his cigar, unwilling to inflict its fumes on Norah and her headache, yet anxious to return home without delay.

So he wandered amongst the poplar alleys to kill time, and presently found himself in front of the stall at which his wife had made so bad a bargain that same afternoon. He remembered she had praised some beads seen in a shop-window as they passed through Frankfort, but which they had no time to stop and purchase. Perhaps he might find something of the same kind here. Puffing his cigar, he

glanced his eye lazily over the counter in search of what he required. Suddenly the colour rose to his brow, and he turned on the German Jew who presided over the emporium, with an energy that made the little man shrink in his shoes.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, pointing to the bracelet he had himself placed on Norah's arm some three months before.

The dealer hesitated, stammered, and could not remember, of course. He had so many customers, so much business, he never refused to bargain. The high and well-born gentleman was obviously a man of taste. If he liked the bracelet he could have it cheap, very cheap. It was worth three thousand florins, but he desired the gentleman's custom. He would take what it had cost him, and the gentleman should have it for twenty-five hundred, if he would buy something else. There was a pearl necklace in the back-shop, and a set of turquoise buttons made for the Grand Duchess herself.

Vandeleur threw away his cigar and took the bracelet out of the other's hand for a nearer inspection. During the space of a moment he turned very pale. It was scarce possible, he thought, that two trinkets could have been made so exactly alike; but he soon determined to set his doubts at rest.

"Twenty-five hundred florins!" said he. "You might as well ask twenty-five millions! I will give you two thousand. That was what the bracelet cost in London, and you will make at least fifty per cent. profit, as you know."

"Not a gulden, not a kreutzer, not a poor half-groschen!" protested the Jew. On the contrary, he would be out of pocket by the transaction. Such dealings would ruin him, would shut up his shop, would cause him to become a bankrupt. Nevertheless, to oblige this English nobleman he would even risk such a catastrophe. But the English nobleman would not forget him, and would deal with him while he remained at Homburg for jewellery, amber, shawls, beads, crystals, porcelain, embroidery, and tobacco. Nay, he could even be of use for cashing bills on well-known houses in London or Paris. Nay, and here he looked exceedingly amiable, if his excellency required any temporary advance at a low rate of interest, he would feel proud to be of service. This in many different languages, with bows, and shrugs, and apologetic wavings of the hands.

Vandeleur cut them all short with some impatience. Producing his cheque-book, he bought the bracelet at once,

and, without permitting it even to be packed, insisted on carrying it away in his hand, glancing on it from time to time with a wild disturbed gaze, while he hurried home.

Mrs. Vandeleur's headache was better. She had drunk a cup of coffee, and come down to the drawing-room. Pocketing his purchase, her husband joined her there with a clouded brow.

"Norah," said he, "I got you a bracelet at London and Ryder's some weeks ago. I saw you wearing it yesterday. Just send your maid for it, please. I met her on the stairs."

Mrs. Vandeleur turned white.

"What do you want it for?" she asked, with a vague idea of gaining time.

He never looked at her,—he seldom did; but though she could not catch his eye, she dreaded the expression of his countenance, while he answered, very slowly—

"I have a particular reason for wishing to look at the stones. I think I have seen one to match it exactly. Will you ring at once?"

Her courage seldom failed her long. It was coming back rapidly. She raised her proud little head and looked full in his face.

"No; I will not!" replied Norah. "My maid could not bring it me, because she hasn't got it."

"You had it on this morning at breakfast," said he, still in the same low, concentrated voice.

"I—I've lost it," she replied. "No! I won't tell you a story about it, Mr. Vandeleur. I—I sold it three hours ago to a German Jew for a hundred pounds."

"You sold it to a German Jew for a hundred pounds!" he repeated. "I know you did. I bought it back for two. Cent. per cent. is the least of the loss when ladies do such things without consulting their husbands. Mrs. Vandeleur, may I ask what use you have made of the hundred pounds thus obtained in so creditable a manner to you and me? You may tell me or not. But depend upon it I shall find this out as I did the other."

She had caught his eye now, and he could not look away from her, though he tried. Shifting his position uneasily, he seemed to abandon the superiority he had assumed. She felt her advantage, and it gave her confidence to speak the truth with a haughty front.

"You may find out what you please," said she. "There is nothing to conceal. I sent the money to Mr. Ainslie, who is ruined, and in the utmost want. I believe he is actually

starving. You won't frighten me, Mr. Vandeleur. I should do the same thing again."

She spoke boldly, but she was frightened none the less; and something told her, though she could not explain why, that the only way in which she controlled him was by keeping her eye fixed on his. It seemed to be with sheer passion that his features worked so painfully, and she sprang to her feet as he drew near, believing for a moment that he would have struck her with his clenched hand.

The sudden movement broke the charm with which she had fixed him, and he burst forth in a torrent of reproaches, insult, and vehement abuse. He did not indeed threaten her with the personal violence she had feared, for even in these moments of uncontrollable anger Vandeleur retained some of the gentlemanlike instincts which had become second nature, but he spoke to her in language such as she had never heard before,—such as, to do him justice, he had never spoken to a woman in his life. Pale, tearful, trembling, but still undaunted, Norah retired as soon as practicable to her own room, where she was suffered to remain undisturbed; but long after she had locked herself in and composed herself, as she hoped, for rest, even till far into the night, she lay quaking and miserable, listening to her husband's voice rating the unfortunate servants, and giving many directions as to packing luggage, railway-trains, fiacres, and other premonitory symptoms of an early start.

Norah could only gather that they were to take their departure the following morning from Homburg, and it was with a weary, aching heart she told herself it mattered little to her how far, or in what direction, they were to go.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DESPOTIC

SINCE we met them at a certain wedding-breakfast to celebrate the success of Mr. Vandeleur's wooing, we have lost sight of two characters indispensable to the progress of our story. It is not to be supposed that Dolly Egremont and Dandy Burton, having quitted the shelter of their tutor's roof, retired therefore into the privacy of domestic life. On the contrary, each of these gentlemen considered himself now launched forth upon the great world, and was perfectly convinced of his own ability to tread a stage whereon success appears so easy to people till they try. Burton, indeed, passed a sufficiently creditable examination, thanks to the care with which Mr. Archer had crammed him, and his own faculty of retaining special information in his head for a limited period. He was, therefore, now chiefly anxious about his speedy appointment to Her Majesty's Household Cavalry, and pending the welcome intelligence, looked for in each succeeding *Gazette*, threw his whole mind into the congenial subjects of boots, leathers, helmets, cuirasses, and such warlike panoply, not to mention chargers, grand in action, faultless in shape, black in colour, or of a dark brown as far removed from black as the colonel's critical eye would permit. Such interests as these left but little room in the Dandy's brains for anything of lighter importance; nevertheless it *did* occur to him that, although his manners were incapable of improvement, his curiosity might be agreeably stimulated by a light course of Continental travel. And, finding the French he had been taught at Eton and elsewhere of little use in Paris, where the natives speak their own language in a mode astounding to English faculties, he wandered aimlessly on as his foreign servant advised, and after drinking *Epernay* at Chalons-sur-Marne, and hearing the clock strike in Strasburg Cathedral, found himself at Heidelberg, very much bored, and half persuaded that he had now done sight-seeing enough, and might go home with a clear conscience, *viâ*

Brussels, Antwerp, and Ostend. To be in a foreign country ignorant of the language (for Burton knew about as much German as most young English gentlemen who have had the advantage of a liberal education, and could ask for a *weiss-caffée* or a *kalbs-cotelette*, but little else), to feel dependent for society on your own thoughts, and for information on a servant with earrings and a velvet cap, in whose intelligence you have more confidence than in his honesty, is a situation that soon becomes irksome, not to say distressing.

Dandy Burton came down to breakfast the morning after his arrival at Heidelberg with a fixed determination to *do* the Castle, the Great Tun, and other curiosities of that picturesque old town in the forenoon, and start for England after an early dinner and a bottle of the only drinkable Rhine wine he had yet been able to find out. Having finished his coffee, he was lighting the indispensable cigar when a heavy hand clapped him on the shoulder, and a cheery voice, recalling the pupil-room at Archer's, accosted him in accents of extreme delight—

"What, Dandy! *our* Dandy! In the Fatherland, in the heart of the Black Forest! In the very paradise of singing, and smoke, and sentiment, and scenery! Pst! waiter! kellner! beer. Bairische bier, ich bitte—geschwind!—Look sharp! On the banks of the Neckar you must keep up your pecker. What a jolly go! Old man, I'm very glad to see you."

Dolly's ovial round face denoted, indeed, the cordiality he felt. Stout, ruddy, sunburnt, with long hair and budding moustaches dressed, moreover, in an indescribable costume, combining the peculiarities of every country through which he had passed, and surmounted by a Tyrolese hat, he might have been taken for a Dutch pedlar, a Belgian bagman, an Alsatian bandmaster, a horse-dealer from the Banat, a German student, or anything in the world but a young Englishman of position, the habitual associate of so unimpeachable a swell as Dandy Burton.

The latter, however, returned his greeting well pleased.

"When did you come?" he asked, "and how long do you stay? I say, we'll do this beastly place together. I thought of going back to-night. I don't mind if I give it another day now. What have you been about since we met at Oakover?

Dolly buried his broad face in the mug of beer placed before him, and set it down half-emptied, with a deep sigh, ere he repled—

"Plucked like a goose, my young friend! Ploughed like an acre of turnips! Spun like a humming-top or a tee-totum! The foe may thunder at the gates now, Dandy. My bleeding country must look to me in vain. Like Caius of Corioli, my vengeance and my wrongs may furnish food for ribald mirth and after-dinner songs. But when the trumpet note of defiance is heard without the walls, you must answer it on your own hook, my boy; you'll have no help from me. And all because I spelt baggage-waggon with too many g's, and couldn't tell my examiner the population, constitution, or hereditary policy of Hesse-Darmstadt."

"Then you're not going to be a soldier after all!" observed Burton in a tone of much commiseration.

"No, I'm *not*," replied Dolly. "And, to tell you the truth, I'm very glad of it. I saw a two-hundred pound shot the other day, and an eighteen-inch iron plating that ought to have resisted it, but didn't! I'm a pretty fair long-stop, as you know, but I think I'd rather not field them, when they come in so sharp as that. I'll tell you what I'll do, though, Dandy, for love of the profession: come and admire you the first day you're on a guard of honour, when there's a levee at St. James's. Have some beer, old chap, and then walk up to the castle with me."

So the two friends strolled through the town without meeting a single student, much to their disappointment; for even the Dandy, whose powers of admiration were limited, had conceived an interest in that picturesque assemblage of unwise young men. He had heard—who has not?—of their associations, their discussions, their duels, their drinking-bouts, their affectations of dress and deportment, their loyalty to one another, and to the brotherhood of which each was so proud to form a part. He would have liked to become better acquainted with a society, than which nothing can be conceived more different from the undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge, or the subalterns in our own regiment of cavalry.

As for Dolly, he was wild about them. So he was about the town, and the castle, and the Black Forest, and the silver Neckar winding through its half-dried bed, in which huge boulders of rock denoted the force of the river when coming down with a winter's flood; also about the Wolfen-Brünnen, famous for its improbable legend, which he related to his companion at great length, with many interpolations and additions of his own. Altogether the Dandy felt he had passed a fatiguing day, when they returned to the old castle, and, leaning against its battlements, took their fill once more

of a panorama of beauty, such as no man who has once seen it can ever forget, such as could rouse even so imperturbable a young gentleman as Burton into exclamations of satisfaction and approval.

"It's very well done indeed!" observed that critic, flinging the end of his cigar down some hundred fathoms of sheer descent, "and if anything could repay such a broil, and such a climb, it would be a view like this! If it wasn't for his boots a fellow might almost fancy he was a bird up here. Mightn't he, Dolly? I don't envy those two, though, down below, having it all before them. The woman is tired already. Look how she lags behind!"

But Dolly did not answer. With all his buffoonery, nay, perhaps in consequence of the comic element in his character, he had keen sensibilities for the grand, the beautiful, or the pathetic, there were tears in his eyes now, dimming the golden sparkle of the sunshine on the river, blurring the outline of that far horizon where endless ranges of the Black Forest joined the bright summer sky.

He gulped them down, though, heartily ashamed, and looked in the same direction as his companion.

"Better and better!" he exclaimed, his face brightening. "Why, it's Mr. and Mrs. Vandeleur! Let's go down and meet them."

They descended without delay. Half-way down the hill they met husband and wife, no longer arm-in-arm, or side-by-side, as people walk whose ideas are in common, or whose hearts answer each other, but several yards apart. Vandeleur looking on the ground, moody, sullen, abstracted, muttering at intervals to himself. Norah, paler even than common, marching far behind him with the stately step and downcast air, yet unsubdued, of a captive in a procession. Every now and then he would stop for her, speak a few common-place words in a cold constrained tone more suggestive of displeasure than the loudest reproof, and move on again without waiting for an answer, as if forgetful of her presence. For the first time since her marriage, Norah was to learn the nature of the yoke under which she had put her neck, the fetters into which she had thrust her feet.

Truth to tell, Mrs. Vandeleur was a good deal frightened. Though of a courageous temperament, last night's outbreak had made no slight impression on her nerves. Since then she had watched her husband's demeanour, as the landsman watches an approaching storm at sea, ignorant alike of how it is to be met, how terrific may be its fury, and how soon it

may break. She had no experience in such matters. No male voice had ever spoken to her before but in accents of kindliness, courtesy, even deference. How was she to encounter bitter taunts, savage threats, unfounded reproaches, from the man she had sworn to love, honour, and obey!

He had not been to bed the previous night, but had entered her room at daybreak, and desired her to make ready at once for departure. Worn and sleepless, she had obeyed without a question. At intervals he broke out against her with confused, half-spoken accusations, to which she thought it better not to reply, although her very silence furnished him with a fresh grievance. He seemed continually on the point of saying something which would not out, of taking some desperate step from which he felt himself restrained without knowing why, and poor Norah quaked to think that at any moment this invisible thread might break, this imaginary safeguard be destroyed.

Under such uncomfortable conditions they entered the carriage which brought them to the railway, and it was only by accident Norah gathered that Heidelberg was to be her destination for the night. Once she ventured to inquire if he was going to take her to England, and Vandeleur, the same Vandeleur whom hitherto she had looked upon, with all his faults, as the perfection of a courteous gentleman, replied—

"You will go wherever I choose—so long as you call yourself my wife! If you think I can't keep you clear of that blackguard Ainslie in England as well as in Germany, you will find yourself most infernally mistaken. Hold your tongue!"

After this she thought it better to ask no more questions; but what an interminable journey it seemed! Arrived at Heidelberg, they sat down to a second breakfast, or an early luncheon,—it was all the same to Norah, for she could scarcely force a morsel down her throat; and entering a carriage according to Vandeleur's desire, expressed in few words, and those none of the kindest, this ill-matched pair proceeded to view the town ere they alighted for a walk up the hill towards the castle, silent as I have said, preoccupied, and twenty yards apart. I question if either of them had eyes for the glowing landscape, the wide immensity of water, wood, and wold they had ostensibly travelled so many leagues to see.

Unlike those which precede matrimony, such conjugal *tête-à-têtes* are exceedingly tedious to the performers. The

commonest aquaintance who breaks in on them is welcomed as a deliverer and a friend. A few weeks ago, perhaps, the same individual would have been received with black looks, short answers, and a manifest disinclination to detain him from any other business he might have on hand. Vandeleur's countenance cleared and his whole manner changed when the two young men met him half-way down the hill. Norah, too, came to the front, and, with the noble instinct of woman that bids her draw the folds of her mantle to conceal her wounds, entered into the usual light laughing conversation with which people think it decent to veil all emotion, whether of joy or sorrow, from their companions.

So the young men turned back, and the whole party went together up the hill, and together visited the curiosities of the castle, ridiculing, even while they felt it most deeply, all the romance, all the interest of the grand old keep. As extremes meet, so the highest-cultured conceal their emotion not less sternly than the immovable savage; and there are few phases of contradictory human nature more amusing than the cold sarcastic mirth with which an exquisite sensibility thinks it necessary to hide its most creditable feelings. Look along the stalls of any of our theatres while a pathetic scene is being enacted, and watch how stealthily people blow their noses in its most touching parts. Perhaps some bearded warrior, who has fronted death scores of times, and fancies himself above all moral or physical weaknesses, will rather tell a deliberate falsehood than acknowledge a generous sympathy, and excuses his watery eyes by pleading a cold in the head!

Vandeleur was popular with young men. His air of good-humoured recklessness won on their fancy, and his reputation of having done everything was not without its charm for those who fondly thought they had got it all to do. He chatted with them in his old pleasant manner, and even altered his demeanour towards his wife. Norah looked at him in mute surprise. This, too, was a new phase in the character which she thought she had learned after a few months. Gradually her own spirits returned, for youth is very elastic and easily stimulated by such restoratives as scenery and sunshine. She, too, began to laugh and talk, showing frankly enough that she was pleased to meet her old friends in this remote foreign town.

When Vandeleur asked them both to dinner at his hotel in little more than an hour's time, she endorsed her husband's invitation so cordially that he ground his teeth in a pang of unfounded jealousy, and the Dandy, who was apt to be

sanguine on such matters, felt persuaded that he had at last made a favourable impression on Mrs. Vandeleur.

"She's tired of him already, Dolly," said he, while they climbed the lofty staircase that led to their bedrooms; "and I'm not surprised. What right had such an old buffer to marry the prettiest girl in the whole county? You may take your oath now she wishes she had waited for somebody else!"

"Meaning you, I suppose," replied Dolly. "No, no, my boy. Don't you believe it. There never was a nicer girl out than Miss Welby—there isn't a better woman on earth than Mrs. Vandeleur. She deserves to be happy, and I hope and trust she is."

Nevertheless, discreet Dolly, entertaining a sincere friendship for the lady of whom he spoke so highly, was not half as well satisfied of her welfare as he pretended to be. He whistled softly to himself the whole time he was dressing, and shook his head at intervals with a whimsical air of apprehension and concern. Nay, while he put the finishing touch to his toilet by tying round his neck the narrow piece of tape that did duty for a white cravat, he broke out aloud into one of the misquotations in which he habitually indulged.

"She's been bewitched," said Dolly. "Poor girl! Regularly bewitched, and though she has discovered it so soon, it's too late.

> Out flew the web, and floated wide,
> The mirror cracked from side to side,
> 'The curse is come upon me!' cried
> The Lady of Shalott;
> 'I promised him I'd be his bride,
> And now I'd rather not!'"

CHAPTER XXIX

DANGEROUS

IT is only his due to observe that John Vandeleur was one of those gentlemen who, if they intended going up in a balloon, would take care to have it warmed, aired, and made thoroughly comfortable.

He was, indeed, well used to travelling on the Continent, and knew better than most people with how little extra forethought and trouble it is possible for those who have plenty of money to carry with them all the luxuries of home. He employed a foreign servant, too,—a perfect treasure, who suffered nobody to rob his master but himself. A servant to whom he need only say, "We start to-morrow at five for Constantinople," and everything would be ready at daybreak, including, perhaps, a Sultan's firman waiting at the first post he should reach on the Turkish frontier. To whom, as on the present occasion, he had but to observe, "Auguste, dinner in half an hour! Covers for four!" and Auguste would reply, "Milor" (he persisted in calling his master "Milor") "shall be served to the minute!" taking care at the same time, even in a greasy German hotel, that the dinner should be as well put on the table, if not as well cooked, the wine as carefully iced, as at Oakover, or the Clarendon, or the Café de Paris itself. When the two guests were ushered by this invaluable domestic into the sitting-room occupied by their host and hostess, these were ready to receive them: Vandeleur, gentlemanlike and hospitable, as if in his own house; Norah, pale and beautiful, in a high transparent dress that set off the symmetry of her neck and shoulders to perfection, her only ornaments a heavy gold bracelet at her wrist, a heavy gold locket on a black velvet round her neck, and a white rose in her dark chestnut hair.

The husband was laughing gaily; the wife looked tranquil and composed. How could the arrivals guess that there had been another scene not ten minutes ago?—that the smiling gentleman extending his hand so cordially to the two young

men had been swearing brutally at the delicate lady to whom they made their bow, accusing her of flirting with the one and valuing the society of the other, as being a dear friend to her lover—hers, a married woman!—but a lover whom he would take d——d good care she should never see again! All this, with strange mutterings, furious gestures, and averted eyes that never looked a moment in her face.

Well, he was pleasant enough now. It was, "Mr. Burton, will you take in my wife? Let me see, which of you two fellows is the eldest? Never mind. Dolly, you will come with me. I can't give you a decent dinner, but the wine is not bad, and after our broiling walk to-day we shall appreciate it. I thought Norah would have fainted, she looked so knocked up when she came in."

Mrs. Vandeleur smiled rather contemptuously, and the party sat down, waited on by Auguste and a benevolent German servant, who appeared to resist with difficulty his desire to join in the conversation.

They talked about England, of course. English people always do talk as if they were within ten miles of Charing Cross. Burton endeavoured to interest Mrs. Vandeleur in his own anticipations of the London season, and she tried to listen as if her thoughts were not far away. Dolly reverted to old times, to the Rectory, to Ripley Water, to the pupil-room at Archer's, and her eye brightened, while the colour came faintly to her cheek. "He liked that country," he said, "he liked that neighbourhood, he admired the scenery, he enjoyed the climate, he thought Oakover the nicest place he had ever seen."

"I wish you could persuade Mrs. Vandeleur of all that," said the host, who seemed, contrary to his usual habit, inclined to grow quarrelsome and argumentative. "It's a devilish odd thing—though, when you're as old as I am you'll both have seen a thousand instances of it—that no woman ever likes to live at her husband's place. It's either too high or too low, or the trees are too near the house, or there's standing water within half a mile that makes it unhealthy. There never are any neighbours. It's dull in the summer and cold in the winter. Or, suppose all these objections are got over, it's sure to be too damp for her constitution in the spring."

"I like Oakover very much," observed Mrs. Vandeleur quietly; "and as for the climate not agreeing with me, I was brought up within two miles of it, as you know."

"Oh, you're a pattern wife, of course," was his answer,

with so unpleasant a smile that it could not escape the observation of his guests. "It's lucky you do like the place, though, for we go straight back there to-morrow, I can tell you."

The young men looked at each other in consternation. Vandeleur's manner was so different from his usual easy good-humoured courtesy that they were puzzled. He was drinking a great deal of wine too, and seemed strangely impatient when Auguste neglected to fill his glass. Even after dinner was over he continued at table, and appeared in no hurry to order coffee. Norah, unwilling to remain, and afraid to go away, sat in utter discomfort, trying to fix her attention on the platitudes of Dandy Burton, who bestowed them liberally, satisfied he was kindling a lively interest in the breast of his handsome hostess. The latter looked all the while to good-natured Dolly Egremont as her mainstay, feeling a certain protection in his presence while he remained, for something told her he would prove a true and loyal friend, but dreading to be left alone with her husband when it should be time for their guests to go away. Fear, however, in the female breast is seldom unaccompanied by the nobler emotion of anger. If her *physique* be equal to it, a high-spirited woman, like a high-couraged horse, is never so daring as when her nerves are excited by well-founded apprehension. Norah was conscious of terror, but her soul rose in rebellion against the unworthy and uncomfortable feeling, and she felt, to carry on the equine metaphor, that one more jerk of the bridle, one more dig from the brutal spur, would get her head up, and rouse her to face anything in the world.

The silence grew irksome; Dandy Burton, wishing to break it, stumbled on the happy topic of Gerard Ainslie. With characteristic felicity he asked point-blank whether his host had heard or seen anything of his fellow-pupil since he left Mr. Archer's?

Vandeleur grinned maliciously at his wife.

"I'm sorry you've inquired," said he. "I ought to tell you all about him. I ought to warn you against him. We left him at Homburg literally begging his bread." Dolly half rose from his chair, as if to be off that moment by the train for Frankfort, and I think Mrs. Vandeleur liked him none the worse for this sudden movement, which she probably understood. "You need not pity him; neither of you. He has done everything that is bad. He has turned out a thorough blackguard. No lady ought even to mention his name. He can never look a gentleman in the face again."

Dolly had got as far as "It's impossible!" when he was silenced by Mrs. Vandeleur.

"You dare not say it to his face!" exclaimed Norah, flushing crimson and turning very pale again in a moment; "and it is cowardly to say it behind his back. Yes, cowardly, Mr. Vandeleur, and unworthy of a man! Mr. Ainslie has been unfortunate, more unfortunate than I can describe; but I tell you, and I tell these old friends of his, that I will not believe a word you say against him; that whatever may have been his follies, he has never been guilty of a low or a mean action, and I will pledge all I have in the world that his sense of honour is as high and as untarnished as my own."

With a bow to be divided between her guests, and a stare of haughty defiance for her husband's exclusive benefit, with head up, measured gait, proud gestures, and sweeping draperies, Mrs. Vandeleur marched out of the room and disappeared.

Burton and Egremont looked in each other's faces aghast, Vandeleur became almost purple, but recovered himself creditably enough, and burst out into a forced laugh.

"Bachelors both!" said he, pushing a bottle of claret across the table, "if you're wise, you'll remain so. Ladies have their tantrums, as you'll probably find out some day. Mrs. Vandeleur isn't at all well just at present. There's no end of steel in those waters at Homburg, and this air is much too bracing; that is why I am taking her to England. Have some more claret, and then we'll smoke a quiet weed before we part."

In common decency the guests were obliged to remain a little longer, but the claret seemed flavourless, the conversation flagged, and, after a cup of coffee, they were only too happy to take their departure.

As they threaded the long corridor of the hotel, Dolly whispered to his friend—

"We've spent a deuced unpleasant evening, to my mind, and I'm sorry for it. You can't call that a dinner of herbs, my boy. Well, matrimony's a noble institution, no doubt; but what we've seen to-day is discouraging, and I don't feel the better for it."

"What can you expect?" answered the other. "He's much too old for her, and she hates him. How handsome she looked when she walked out! Let us go and smoke in the court, Dolly. It is cool there, and a beautiful starlight night."

So the two went down into the courtyard, surrounded on

three sides by the hotel, and on the fourth by the stables. It wanted still some hours of midnight, and even the honest early German folks had not yet retired to rest. Lights were gleaming from many of the windows, standing open to let in the fresh night-air. Dolly and Burton, smoking their cigars, wondered lazily which were those of Mrs. Vandeleur, and pursued the thread of their conversation.

"I thought his eyes were very queer," observed Burton, after expressing an unflattering opinion that Mr. Vandeleur had aged very much in the last few months. "And his voice seemed changed. He mopped up his champagne, though, pretty freely. Do you suppose, now, he could have been drunk?"

"Drunk? Not he!" answered Dolly. "There's no stronger-headed fellow out than Vandeleur, nor a less excitable one. Depend upon it, he knows what he's about. Hark! what's that?"

What, indeed! A confused wrangle of voices, raised to an angry pitch—an altercation—a quarrel. Dolly's sharp ears caught Mrs. Vandeleur's tones, eager, excited, in accents of scorn, expostulation, then entreaty—lastly, terror!

The two listeners sprang across the court, and stood for a moment spellbound, beneath the windows of a brightly lighted apartment on the second floor. The rooms below were very lofty, and it was not easy to hear what went on within an upper chamber so high above the ground.

Shadows passing rapidly to and fro traversed the wall opposite the broad open casement.

Hoarse, as with mad fury long suppressed, a whisper hissed down into the court—

"By h—ll, I will! I'll strangle you!"

Then a long, wild, ringing shriek, and dashing into the house for a rescue, Dolly, closely followed by his friend, came in collision, at the door, with Mrs. Vandeleur in her night-dress, her hair down, her feet bare, her whole appearance denoting extremity of terror and dismay.

"Save me! save me!" screamed Norah, clinging to Dolly like a terrified child. "He'll kill me!—he's raving mad! Help him, somebody!" she added, beginning to sob as her courageous nature re-asserted itself. "Help him!—perhaps he'll kill himself!"

Even while she spoke they heard a rushing sound, followed by a dull dead bump on the paved surface of the court. Norah's strength failed her now. Already the hotel was alarmed. Lights were glancing, and servants running about

in all directions. They covered Mrs. Vandeleur with a cloak, and carried her off unresisting, for she had fainted away.

"It's all over!" said Burton, as the hand he lifted fell lifeless and inert across Vandeleur's bruised and mangled body, lying in a pool of blood. "Stark naked, too!" he added, looking down at the ghastly mass. "And to jump from such a height! He must have been as mad as Bedlam!"

He must indeed! That poor terrified woman, now happily insensible, could have told them how her husband forced himself into her chamber, raving at her with a maniac's incoherent fury, tearing off article after article of clothing as he stormed; how he hunted her into the sitting-room, threatening her every moment with a horrible death; how she reached the door, in which the key, with its numeral attached, had been fortunately left on the outside, and turned it on him ere she fled; lastly, how to her dying day she would be haunted by the dire horror that this act of self-defence had caused him to leap through the window into the courtyard below!

It was well for Mrs. Vandeleur that she had a true friend like Egremont to stand by her in this sad crisis of her life. Everything that could be done for her comfort was attended to by kind-hearted, sympathising Dolly, and it was only at her repeated entreaties, and the considerations of propriety she strongly urged—for Norah never lost the habit of thinking for herself—that he consented to prosecute his journey with Burton next day, and left her to the charge of an English physician resident in the town. The following paragraph appeared in *Galignani* within a week of the accident:—

"*Deplorable Catastrophe at Heidelberg, and Supposed Suicide of a Gentleman.*—On Friday last this romantic old town was startled by one of those awful calamities which occur at intervals to rouse us from the apathy of conventional life. An English gentleman of high position, accompanied by his lady, and attended by several domestics, arrived in the early train from Frankfort to take up his quarters at the *Rheinische-Hof*. After visiting the castle and other objects of interest in the neighbourhood, he sat down to dinner with a few friends, who parted from him at an early hour apparently in his usual health and spirits. About midnight the inmates of the hotel were alarmed by the screams of his lady, and it was found that the unfortunate gentleman had precipitated himself from an upper-floor window into the courtyard below. Dr. Drum of Heidelberg was promptly on

the spot, but medical skill proved necessarily unavailing in so frightful a catastrophe. Continued ill-luck at the play-tables of Homburg is rumoured to have been the cause of this rash act; and when we mention the name of the victim as John Vandeleur, Esq., of Oakover, in the county of——, we leave our readers to infer how enormous must have been the pecuniary losses that could thus drive the owner of a princely fortune into the commission of so awful and irrevocable a crime. — *Quem Deus vult perdere prius dementat!*"

This paragraph, quotation and all, found its way into the London papers, and his old associates in clubs or such places of public resort talked about "poor Vandeleur" for a day or two, and forgot him. "Married, wasn't he? and for the second time?" said the Club-world. "Ah! he was always as mad as a hatter! Very pretty girl, was she? Clergyman's daughter somewhere near his own place, and thirty years younger than himself! Ah! I wish she had jumped out of window instead of him, and I'd been underneath to catch her!"

And this was Vandeleur's *requiescat in pace.*

CHAPTER XXX

A WOMAN'S WORK

I REMEMBER long ago to have witnessed a thrilling drama called, if my memory serves me, by the appalling title of *The Vampire*, the continuity of which was intrusted, with blind confidence in their powers of ideality, to the imagination of an English audience. Between its acts, while the orchestra played the galop in *Gustavus*, while you rose in your stall, turned round to survey the house, wiped your glasses, and sat down again, an interval of fifty years or more was supposed to elapse. I will not call upon my readers for quite so elastic a stretch. I will only ask them to imagine that more than a lustre, say rather less than two, has passed away since the quiet of the *Rheinische-Hof* at Heidelberg was disturbed by the eccentricities of its English visitors,—such a period as makes but little difference in our own feelings, or our own appearance, but sadly thins our male friends' hair, and plays the deuce with the skin and teeth of the woman we adore—such a period as scatters over the world almost any party of half a dozen, however staunch and cohesive it may have boasted its immutability—such a period as has materially altered the fortunes and position of each individual in our story. Perhaps of none more than Gerard Ainslie, destined as it would seem to fill the part of that rolling stone which proverbially gathers no moss; though why any stone, rotatory or at rest, should be the better for that vegetable covering, I leave for explanation to those who are more discerning in the wisdom of proverbs than myself.

Gerard, then, ruined and almost broken-hearted, must have had no resource left but for a sum of money received through Messrs. Goldsmith, from a banker at Heidelberg, to be delivered into the young man's own hand, on receipt of an undertaking in writing that he would leave Homburg and its temptations within an hour. The conditions were necessarily accepted, and Gerard, penniless but for this timely assistance, found himself cast on the world with a few pounds indeed in

his pocket, but a very vague idea of where he was to get any more when these were spent.

There was a refuge, however, for the destitute in those days, and a resource for the desperate, of which we hear but little now. Some few years ago when a man thrust his hands in his trousers-pockets, to find them empty, he borrowed all he could get from the friend who would pay highest to get rid of him (generally a relative, or one on whom he had some claim of kindred or gratitude), bought two red shirts and a revolver, took a steerage passage in a Black Ball liner, and was off to the gold-diggings!

The plan had many advantages; not the least of them being the probability that the adventurer would never come back.

So this young gentleman, who had scarcely done a day's work in his life, made his way to the modern El Dorado, to cook, and dig, and wield a pickaxe, and shake a riddle till his back ached, alternating these labours with the nursing of a sick comrade or two, and a narrow squeak for his own life from cholera, followed by a prostrating attack of fever and ague.

But it was just such a training as was wanted to make a man of him. Who would have believed that the bearded bronzed, powerful-looking fellow sitting over a wood fire at night, with three or four miners, not a whit more rough-looking customers than himself, turning a "damper" in the embers, holding a short black pipe between his teeth, could be the white-handed Gerard Ainslie, of Mr. Archer's pupil-room, and the depôt of the 250th Regiment of the line? Who would have supposed, while the deep manly voice of a comrade trolled out how—

> They fitted a grey marble slab to her tomb,
> And fair Alice lies under the stone,

that the drop caught in that shaggy beard, and glistening in the firelight, was a tribute of memory to the delicate beauty of pale, haughty Mrs. Vandeleur, how many thousand miles away? Tears, indeed! There were plenty of bold hearts there with a spot in them soft enough to be stirred by that plaintive ditty; and many a daring, desperate man, sitting over his camp-fire within hearing of "Ben Bolt," was crying too, like a woman or a child.

But they worked fourteen hours a day nevertheless, and Gerard found himself at San Francisco with eleven hundred pounds in his pocket, and his heart eaten by that home-

sickness which is so apt to attack the wanderer just when his fortunes are on the turn, and it is folly to think of going back so soon.

Here the demon of play took hold of him once more, and he lost nearly half his gains in a single venture. But it cured him. The man was altered now. His whole character was hardened and improved. He had been living for months together with his life in his hand. He had earned every penny he got literally with the sweat of his brow. He had shed blood in self-defence without scruple, but he had nursed more than one staunch friend through deadly sickness with the gentle tenderness of a woman. He had lost the selfishness that makes a man a gambler. With him, indeed, it had been the selfishness of too plastic and impressionable a nature ; but it was gone. He had been through the fire, and was forged, so to speak, and tempered into steel : yet one image, that of Norah Welby, the fair young girl he remembered so vividly under the cedar at her father's parsonage, was burnt all the deeper and more indelibly into his heart. It kept him pure through many a scene of vice and temptation ; if not a happier, he felt that it made him a better man ; and, as he sometimes told himself with a sigh, it could never be effaced.

Gerard Ainslie played no more after his loss at San Francisco, but he abandoned all intention of returning at once to England, and ventured his remaining six hundred on a speculation of sheep-farming, which seemed promising enough, in Vancouver's Island. For a year or two he prospered wonderfully. His farm flourished, his flocks and herds increased, he erected water-mills, he hired emigrants from the Scottish Highlands who were not afraid of work, and entered fairly on the high road to fortune. He had even taken to himself an overseer, and considered he was entitled to a few weeks' sporting relaxation in the bush. So he started on a two months' expedition, killed very little game, and returned to find himself a ruined man. His overseer had sickened and died. His Highland emigrants had neglected everything. The rot had broken out amongst his sheep, and the murrain had swept off his cattle. Worse than all, a flood had come down to spoil his crops, and had carried away the mills in which he had sunk nearly his whole capital. The wreck of his little fortunes barely enabled him to return to the diggings, and begin again, richer only in experience than when he came out from England many years before.

But men get used to hard usage from Fortune, as from any other foe. After the second time or so nobody cares a fig for a knock-down blow, moral or physical. Gerard was man enough to feel thankful now that Norah's happiness was in no way dependent on his exertions; that she was comfortable, well provided for, and had *almost* forgotten him. Not quite: he would not have her forget him quite. So he took to the mattock again with a will, but it was uphill work this time. Most of the holes he tried were worn out, and once (a rare occurrence) he was robbed by his mate; but, after many fluctuations, he found himself at last, with wrinkles about his eyes and a few grey hairs in his brown beard, on board a noble packet-ship, plunging gallantly before the trades, homeward bound!

His passage was paid; he had a few dollars in a pocket-book for mess expenses, and two hundred pounds in gold sewed into a belt, which he wore under his shirt. He would not be robbed by comrade or shipmate a second time. And this modest sum represented as many years of labour, as much of privation and self-denial, as have sometimes gone to the acquisition of half a million.

The good ship ran her knots off handsomely enough, and about daybreak on a spring morning came alongside the quay at Liverpool, to discharge, first her passengers, and then the cargo of wool and tallow with which she floated deep in the water. For the accommodation of the former, an inclined plane, consisting of a slippery plank or two, with a lofty hand-rail, was hastily thrust upward; and along this insecure gangway the steerage passengers, following each other like a flock of sheep, slipped, and climbed, and stumbled to the shore. Gerard was in no hurry, but drifted onward with the others, his little valise in his hand, the belt that carried all his worldly wealth round his waist. Immediately in front of him was a woman returning to England with two fatherless children—the one in her arms, the other, an urchin of scarcely four years old, clinging to the skirts of her dirty cotton gown. The little fellow seemed bewildered by the crush, confusion, and novelty of the situation; he had forgotten what land was like, and his poor short legs were cramped and numbed by long confinement on board ship. He missed his footing, let go of his mother's gown, and passing easily under the hand-rail, tumbled headlong into six fathom of water in the dock-basin. It was a ghastly face that turned on Gerard's under the grey light of early morning; but in the mother's wild, hopeless, tortured stare

he read what had happened almost before the scream rose on her pale, parted lips, and the splash below subsided into eddying circles of green, bubbling water.

He never thought twice about it. Ere they could heave a rope's-end from the quay he was overboard too, diving after a wisp of white that eluded his reach, like a streak of dim, distant light in a dream. The seconds are very long under water. It seemed an age before he could grasp it; but he rose at last, child and all, to the surface, the lighter that his belt had given way, and the whole of his two hundred sovereigns were buried far below the good ship's keel—a ransom, and a cheap one, as he swore directly he got his breath, for the poor, innocent little life.

They had him, with his pale, limp burden clinging to his neck, in the bight of a rope the instant he appeared; and they cheered him, those honest sailors, with a will. Nay, they even raised a modest subscription amongst themselves, when they learned his loss, that brought the tears into his eyes. While the half-frantic mother, who had nothing to give but her prayers, knelt at his feet on the hard quay, and kissed his brown, weather-beaten hands, calling him an angel from heaven all the time. And so he was to *her* the good angel of deliverance, for whom she taught her children, too, to pray such prayers as I think are never offered up in vain.

Thus it was that Gerard Ainslie touched English ground once more, as poor in worldly goods as when he left it, but rich in a fund of self-control and self-reliance, not to mention the glow of a gallant action, and the praise of a few stout, honest, kindly hearts.

CHAPTER XXXI

"AFTER LONG YEARS"

I AM persuaded that in our English climate, and under the conditions of our social existence, so favourable to their ascendency, women wear considerably better than men. I know such an opinion is rank heresy with the multitude, and that it is held an established axiom, though I am ignorant how it can be borne out by common sense, that a woman is virtually older than a man of the same age. The truth of this assertion I emphatically deny. Go into any London drawing-room, or other gathering of the upper classes, and while there is no mistaking the *men* of forty, you will find it impossible, judging by appearance, to guess any of the women's ages within ten years. The same argument holds good, though in a modified degree, at a country merry-making or a fair. Jack, when his eighth lustre is quivering on its close, shows marks of time and hard usage far more plainly than Jill, and finds himself bent, grey, and wrinkled, while she remains brown, comely, and upright as a bolt.

The years, then, with their recurring hardships and vicissitudes, that scored lines on Gerard Ainslie's brow, and left little silver threads about his temples, had but developed Norah Vandeleur's beauty into the grace and majesty of mature womanhood. While she retained all her girlish symmetry of form, she had acquired a certain dignity of gait and bearing that would have become a queen. While her mere physical charms had lost nothing of their colour and freshness, the deep eyes, the rare smile, had gained such powers of fascination as spring from a cultivated intellect: alas! too often, also, from a saddened suffering heart.

"Isn't she beautiful? But she doesn't look happy!" Such was the verdict in every society she entered. Such was the expression of admiration, so qualified, from nine out of every ten people who turned round to look at her as she walked through a room.

With great personal advantages, with a subdued, graceful, and exceedingly natural manner, it required but a very few London seasons to establish Mrs. Vandeleur as one of the best known and most eagerly sought after of those beautiful ornaments whom people are always anxious to see on their staircases, in their reception-rooms, and at their pleasantest dinner-parties. Strange to say, the women did not hate her half so rancorously as might have been expected. At first, indeed, the appearance in their cruising-grounds of a craft so trim, so taut, so formidable as a privateer, and carrying guns calculated to do such execution, roused resistance, no less than apprehension, and they prepared to combine against her with that energetic animosity, devoid of scruple, ruth, or fair play, which is so commendable a feature in their warfare on their own sex.

But when they found, as they soon did, that the beautiful, rakish-looking schooner was averse to piracy, and careless of plunder; when they saw her dismiss the prizes that ran so eagerly under her bows, contemptuously indeed, and with little goodwill, but obviously as scorning nothing more than the notion of towing them into port; when, to speak plainly, they discovered that Mrs. Vandeleur cared as little for the homage of mankind in general, including their own faithless adorers, as for all the rest of the glitter by which she was surrounded, looking, as indeed she felt, a good deal bored with the whole thing, they declared, first, neutrality, then adhesion, soon protested that it was better to have her for a friend than an enemy, and finally paid her the high compliment of voting her one of themselves.

She had taken a charming little house in Belgravia, of which the door seemed always fresh painted, and the bell-handles lately gilt. Her footmen were tall and well powdered, her horses stepped up to their noses, and her carriages looked as if they went every year to be done up at the coachmaker's. A pair of those valuable horses, one of those well-varnished carriages, was to be seen every night in the season waiting for Mrs. Vandeleur, whenever there was a gathering of the smartest people in London. These assemblages are not always intensely amusing. I believe coachmen and horses were less delighted to drive home than the mistress herself. Nevertheless, one year after another found her going the same monotonous round,—flattered, admired, courted, lonely, wearied, wondering why she did it, and vowing every season should be her last.

People thought it "so odd Mrs. Vandeleur didn't marry!"

and more than one spendthrift, faultless in attire and irresistible in manners, took upon himself, at short notice, to ask the question from a personal point of view. I never heard that any of these could complain of not receiving a sufficiently explicit answer. But an elderly nobleman, with an unencumbered rent-roll and a grown-up family, who really admired her for herself, took her rebuff so much to heart that he left London forthwith, though in the middle of June, and was seen no more till the last fortnight in July.

Perhaps this disconsolate suitor, whose first wife had been what is popularly called a Tartar, studied Mrs. Vandeleur's character with more attention than the rest. He used to puzzle himself as to why it was he got on so much better with her in general society than alone. He used even to fancy that if his love-making could only be done across a dinner-table, he might have a chance of success; but you can't tell a woman you are getting too fond of her for your own happiness—which I imagine is as good a way of opening the trenches as any other—through an *épergne* and a quantity of ferns! He used to marvel why, in a *tête-à-tête*, she was so conventional, so guarded, so chilling, absent, too, in manner, whatever he might say, as if she was thinking of something else. Above all, would he have given his earldom to know what it was, or whom, that those deep, dreamy eyes were looking at, through, and far beyond his own goodly person—far beyond the Venetian blinds in the windows—his brougham in the street, and his brother-in-law's house over the way.

So, you see, a good many people were in love with handsome Mrs. Vandeleur, all in their different styles; for the epidemic, though dangerous, no doubt, in some cases, attacks its victims in various dissimilar forms. With one it produces a deep and abiding sore, burning, festering, eating its pernicious way into the quick; with another it becomes a low fever, dispiriting, querulous, prostrating body and mind alike; while from you or me it may pass away in a slight local inflammation, best cured by tonics, anodynes, or perhaps the homœopathic remedy of a counter-irritant.

When it has taken deep root in the system, and can withstand the wholesome influence of absence, change of scene, and fresh faces, I had rather not prescribe for it. There is, indeed, one specific left, proverbially irremediable as death, and it is called Marriage; but I will not take upon myself to affirm that even this last resource, desperate though it be, would prove successful in some of the more fatal cases that have come under my notice.

With all her noble, well-dressed, well-known lovers and admirers, it may be that Mrs. Vandeleur had none so unselfish, so devoted, so true as Gerard Ainslie, in his obscure lodgings and his shabby clothes—Gerard Ainslie, who for all these long years had never looked upon her face but in his dreams, and yet to whom, sleeping or waking, that dear face was ever present, pale, delicate, and beautiful as of old. This idea—for it was but an idea, after all—had grown to be the one refinement of his life, the one link that connected him with the other pleasant world which he began to remember but dimly, to which he saw no prospect that he would ever return.

He had come to London, of course, and with a certain sensation of honest pride that at least he had been no burden to his relation, sought out his great-uncle to ask, not for assistance, but a simple recommendation and assurance that he was an honest man. The old gentleman had married his housekeeper, and the door was shut in Gerard's face. He turned rather bitterly away, and for a moment wished himself back in Vancouver's Island; but he was accustomed to hard usage now. He had a pound or two in his pocket, and his training during the last few years had made of the eager, impulsive stripling a strong, persistent man.

He determined not to break in on his little store till he could use it to advantage. That same afternoon he earned a supper and a bed unloading one of the lighters at a wharf below bridge. The men who worked with him were little rougher than some of his mates at the diggings—more vicious, perhaps, certainly not so courteous, and less reckless; but he shared his tobacco and drank his beer with them contentedly enough. Nay, he engaged himself at good wages for a fortnight's spell at the same labour, which did him a deal of good, and put a few more shillings in his pocket. These kept him while he tried his hand at a little authorship for the penny papers, and then he resolved to embark all his capital, something short of five pounds, in another venture. There was nothing of the gambler left in Gerard now but the cool courage of a wise speculator, whose experience tells him when it is justifiable to risk all.

So he invested in a suit of clothes, such as he had not worn for years. Scanning himself in the tailor's full-length glass, he could not forbear a smile.

"It's odd enough," he muttered. "I'll be hanged if I don't look like a gentleman still!" And so he did; and so thought the editor of *The Holborn Gazette and Sporting*

Telegraph for the East End, when the unsuccessful gold-digger stepped into the office of that wonderful journal to offer his contributions with as much indifference as if he had been a duke. Truth to tell, he cared little whether they were accepted or not, having in his heart a hankering preference, which common sense told him was ill-judged, for the out-of-door labour and rough hard-working life on the river.

The editor, a man of observation, could not believe that weather-browned face and those large muscular shoulders were of the fraternity who live by wielding the pen. So well-developed a frame, clad in broad-cloth, instead of fustian, could only belong to the classes who have leisure to spend their time in open-air pursuits for pleasure rather than profit. And as it is notorious that a man who can make his own terms always has the best of the bargain, Gerard Ainslie walked out into the street with an assurance of employment that would at least keep him from starving.

And now, I think, came the unhappiest part of his life. His work was distasteful, and he got through it with difficulty. The profits enabled him, indeed, to live, but that was all. He had no society of any kind, and often found himself pining for the rough cordiality and boisterous mirth of the gold-seekers; for the deep voices, the jolly songs, the glare of the camp-fires, the fragrant fumes of the "honey-dew," and the tot of rum that passed from beard to beard, with an oath, perhaps, but an oath as expressive of good-fellowship and goodwill as a blessing.

A cup of weak tea, in a two-pair back, seemed but a mild exchange for the old roystering life, after all. His health failed, his cheek grew hollow, and he began to assume the appearance of a worn-out broken-down man. About this period Gerard very nearly took to drinking. He was saved by an accident, resulting, indeed, from the very habit he was disposing himself to acquire. When work was over, he would go to dinner, as dine he must, at the nearest tavern. Without absolutely exceeding, he would then sit smoking and sipping, smoking and sipping, till it was time to go to bed. What could he do? It was his only relaxation. To spend the night at a theatre was hot and expensive; to walk the streets, cold and uncomfortable; besides, it wore his boots out. He tried Evans's more than once; but Mr. Green was so courteous and agreeable, the singing so ravishing, the cave of harmony so comfortable, that it led him into the disbursement of more small change than he could afford. So he relapsed into such dull, stupid, sleepy evenings as I have described. They told

on his dress, his constitution, and his appearance. One night, after he had exhausted the evening papers, a neighbour, leaving the next table, handed him the *Morning Post*, a journal good enough to devote whole columns to recording the amusements of the aristocracy, and obtaining in consequence a vast circulation about the West End of London, though rarely to be found in any of the chop-houses near the Strand. Glancing his eye wearily over the "Fashionable Intelligence," Gerard started to see Mrs. Vandeleur's name amongst a hundred others, as having been at the opera the night before. He sprang to his feet, threw away his half-smoked cigar, and finished his gin-and-water at a gulp. She was in London, then! Actually in the same town with himself! Perhaps not half a mile off at that moment! And then the cold, sickening thought came over him, that he, the ruined, shabby, vagrant penny-a-liner, was separated as effectually here, from the rich, high-bred, fashionable lady, as if the Pacific still rolled between them, and he was again sifting gravel in his red shirt, to find the gold he had never coveted so eagerly as now.

But the burning thirst came on him once more—the feverish, ungovernable longing to look on that face again. He would have sold his life, he thought, almost his soul, but to see her for a minute. He could not rest; he could not sit still. The evening was far advanced, but he wandered out into the streets, with the wild notion, which yet carried a vague happiness, that he was in search of Norah; that, come what might, he would at least stand face to face with her again. His own weary footstep, once so quick and active, still reminded him of those walks across the Marshes, in the happy days when life was all before him, and hope had something to offer better than wealth, or honour, or renown.

It seemed but yesterday; and yet the contrast between then and now smote him with a pity for himself that filled his eyes with tears. They did him good: they cleared his brain, and he grew practical once more.

He was determined to see Norah, no doubt; but he must find out where she lived; and for that purpose he entered a stationer's shop in Bond Street, not yet closed, bought a pennyworth of notepaper—which left him exactly a shilling in his pocket—and asked leave to look in the "Court Guide."

He did not need to hunt far down the V's for the name he wanted; and in less than twenty minutes, without considering what he should do next, he found himself at Mrs. Vandeleur's door.

It was something to feel the possibility of her being within ten yards of the spot where he stood; but his wandering life, with all its vicissitudes, had not rooted out a regard for those inexorable *convenances* which are stronger than gates of triple brass and bars of steel. How could he ask to see Mrs. Vandeleur at nine o'clock in the evening? he in his now shabby hat and worn-out clothes! Why, the servant would probably send for a constable to order him away! No, he must trust to chance and time; patient and weary, like a "painter" crouching for its spring, or a hunter waiting at a salt-lick for a deer.

He had made several turns opposite the house, and had, indeed, attracted the attention of an observant policeman, when one of the many postal deliveries with which our leisure hours are cursed came to his assistance. A powdered head rose from Mrs. Vandeleur's area to the level of the postman's feet, and a simpering face grinned through the railings.

"Robert Smart?" asked the Government functionary, stern and abrupt, as behoves one whose time is precious.

"Robert Smart it is!" answered the footman, and immediately tore open the envelope thrust into his hand. It was a ship-letter, written on thin paper.

Gerard had found his opportunity, and now drew a bow at a venture.

"Is your name Smart?" said he, stopping short, and looking at the man as if he saw something in his face that he recognised. "Haven't you a brother at Ballarat? If so, I've seen him within a twelvemonth."

"No!" answered the man, grinning again with surprise and gratification; "but I've a cousin there of my own name. I've got this here letter from him just now."

Gerard had picked up some experience knocking about the world. "I can tell you all about him," said he, "for I knew him well. If you're only half as good a chap as your cousin, I daresay you'll step round and take a toothful of something short to our better acquaintance. I little thought my old pal's cousin would be one of the first friends I should meet in this great rambling town."

Such an invitation was too tempting to be refused. Mr. Smart had but to return indoors for his coat, and make some arrangements with an under-housemaid, contrary to the standing orders of the establishment, as to answering the door-bell. Ere many minutes elapsed the footman was deep in a quartern of gin-and-cloves, purchased with his last shilling by his new acquaintance.

Communicative and affable, Mr. Smart soon informed Gerard of Mrs. Vandeleur's present whereabouts and future movements. She was dining with a "h'earl," as he called it, near St. James's Square, and was going thence to Lady Billesdon's party. He knew it, though he was himself off duty that night, because the carriage was ordered to fetch her at eleven, and she was not coming home to dress, but going straight on from her dinner to the ball. Eleven o'clock he was sure, for he carried the order himself to the coachman, who "cussed horrible"; and wouldn't his new friend take his share of another quartern at his, Mr. Smart's, expense?

But his new friend left him more abruptly than he considered compatible with good manners, for eleven was already striking. Gerard hurried off to the "h'earl's," in the vicinity of St. James's Square, but he was too late. Then he walked up and down all night, and waited till morning dawned, and so saw Mrs. Vandeleur get into her carriage to go home; nay, had the additional felicity of picking off the pavement a certain white rose she dropped, to lay it inside his threadbare old waistcoat, next his heart.

This was the man I saw leaning against the street-railings in strong suppressed emotion when I myself was leaving Lady Billesdon's hospitable mansion after her charming ball; and thus, having brought my story back to the point from which it started, I must take what seafaring men call a fresh departure, and proceed henceforth in regular order through the succeeding chapters.

CHAPTER XXXII

MR. BARRINGTON-BELGRAVE

A MAN who is leading an unhealthy life at anyrate, and who walks about the streets all night under strong feelings of anxiety and agitation, becomes faint and exhausted towards sunrise, and disposed to look favourably even on such humble refreshment as may be procured at an early coffee-stall. Passing one of these, Gerard, feeling in his pockets for the coin he knew was not forthcoming, cast certain wistful glances at a cup of the smoking beverage, which were not lost on the customer for whom it had been poured out—an individual of remarkable, not to say eccentric, demeanour and appearance, oddly cloaked, oddly booted, oddly hatted, majestic in manners, and somewhat shabby in dress.

Diffusing around him an odour of tobacco and brandy, this personage stopped Gerard with an elaborate bow.

"Permit me, sir," he said in a deep hoarse voice; "I have discovered, perhaps, the hottest and strongest coffee made in the metropolis. Will you allow me to offer you a cup in the way of kindness? At my expense, you understand, sir,—at my expense!"

Gerard accepted courteously. The man's manner changed, and he looked hard in the other's face.

"An early bird," said he, folding his shabby cloak across his breast as a Roman drapes himself in his *toga* on the stage; "an early bird, sir, like myself. I make you my compliments, as we say over the water. There is a freshness in the morning air, and to me nature, the mighty mother of creation, in all her moods, is still expansive, still sublime."

They were standing at Hyde Park Corner, and he pointed down Grosvenor Place with the air of one who was indicating the snowy range of the Himalayas, for instance, to a friend who had just come gasping up to Simla from the plains.

"Early indeed," answered Gerard, laughing, "for I have not been to bed."

The other hiccoughed, and sucked in a long pull of his hot coffee.

"You take me," said he,—"you take me. A man after my own heart, sir—a kindred spirit—a gentleman too—excuse me"— Here he lifted his hat with a grace that was only spoilt by the limp state of its brim. "A man of mark, no doubt, and a justice of peace in your own country, simple as you stand here—hey? Not been to bed, say you? Marry, sir, no more have I. Will you come and break your fast with me? Now, at once, here, close at hand. I bid you for sheer goodwill. But stay—this is scarcely fair."

He winked solemnly, looked at Gerard with an air of half-drunken gravity while he paid for the coffee, then took him by the arm, and proceeded very deliberately—

"I study you, sir—I study you. Do you object to be studied? If you do, say so, and I desist. If you don't, breakfast with me, and I'll go on. I studied you from the first, before you reached Apsley House. It's my profession, and I glory in it! Do you think now, in the interest of art and as a personal favour, you could repeat the same expression you wore then, after breakfast? I could catch it in five minutes. Come, sir, I'll be frank with you. I want it for the part of Rinaldo in *The Rival's Revenge.* I've been looking for it for twenty years, and hang me if I've ever seen the real trick of the thing till this morning. Up here, if you please; they know me here. This way!"

Gerard was not averse to breakfast, nor unwilling to take advantage of any society that might distract him from his own thoughts. He accompanied his new friend accordingly into a small tavern in one of the streets off Piccadilly, where a snug little breakfast was laid for them almost before they had time to sit down. While his entertainer extricated himself with some difficulty from the voluminous recesses of his cloak, Gerard removed his hat, and took a chair opposite the window. The other peered curiously in his guest's face.

"Excuse me," said he; "I suspected it from the first. I am a man of honour. We are alone: you need be under no apprehension. How do you do, Mr. Ainslie?"

Gerard started. "You know me then?" he exclaimed "And who the devil are—I mean, where have I had the pleasure of meeting you before?"

"You are altered," answered his companion, "and you had no more beard than the palm of my hand when I saw you last; but I never forget a face. I have studied your

appearance and manners many a time for light parts in genteel comedy. I do assure you, sir, without compliment now, that my unparalleled success in Frank Featherbrain was chiefly owing to your unconscious exposition of the part. For the real empty-headed fop the critics said they never saw its equal."

"But I don't remember you," said Gerard, not so much flattered as the other seemed to expect. "Your face is perfectly strange to me. And yet," he added, with perfect truth, "I don't think I should ever have forgotten it."

His companion looked much pleased. "Striking, sir," he answered,—"striking, I believe; and expressive, it is no vanity to admit. But you remember a certain hurdle-race many years ago, in which you sustained a severe and heavy fall. I picked you up, sir, and saw you home. I was lodging at the same house. My name was Bruff then, sir; I have changed it since. Mr. Barrington-Belgrave, at your service." Producing a limp little card, he handed it to Gerard with a good deal of pretension.

The latter could but express his delight at such an introduction; and Mr. Barrington-Belgrave, as we must now call him, continued the conversation, working vigorously at his breakfast the while.

"A sad accident, sir, a sad accident. We put you into a fly, and we bore you upstairs, I and—and—another party—an extremely talented party that, and with great personal attractions. Would it be indiscreet to ask? Ah! pardon me, not another word. I see I have touched a chord. Poor thing! poor thing! I remember now; so young, so beauteous, and so early—ah!"

Mr. Belgrave hid his face, as under the influence of painful sympathy, in a red cotton handkerchief. He did not observe, therefore, the puzzled expression of Gerard's countenance. The latter, indeed, often wondered what had become of Fanny, though thinking of her, no doubt, less continuously than was due to the remembrance of a wife who might be alive or dead. He inclined, perhaps, to the opinion that she was no more; but this part of his past life had become so distasteful to him that he dismissed it as much as possible from his thoughts, and, indeed, had no means of making inquiries as to her welfare, or even her existence, had he been ever so anxious to take her back again, which he was not.

After such a pause as on the stage allows eight bars of music to be played without interruption, Mr. Barrington-

Belgrave, becoming gradually sober, but feeling none the less interested in the broken-down gentleman who was breakfasting with him, put a leading question.

"And may I ask, sir, as an old friend—perhaps I should say a new friend and an old acquaintance—what you are doing in London, and how you like it?"

"Doing!" answered Gerard, glancing down at his own worn attire; "why, doing devilish badly, as you see; and for *liking* it, I don't like it at all. I'm what they call a hack, I believe, on a penny paper. Since you saw me, Mr. Belgrave, I've carried a pen, and I've carried a pickaxe. I'll tell you what, the last is the easier to handle, and earns the best wages of the two."

Mr. Belgrave ruminated, rang the bell, and ordered two small glasses of brandy.

"A man of education," he observed dogmatically, "a man of observation, a man who has lived in society, and seen the world—why don't you write for the stage?"

Gerard stared, and swallowed his glass of brandy at a gulp.

"Do they pay you well?" said he, after a pause. "It's not a bad idea; I can but try."

"If you think of it," answered the other, wisely forbearing to commit himself on the remuneration question, "I could put you in the way of having a piece read, which is a great matter, and sometimes, though not invariably, a necessary preliminary to its being accepted. I am engaged myself at present at the Accordion, and have some interest with the manager. Between you and me, though of course it goes no further, I am taking one or two inferior parts as a personal favour to that gentleman. We expect an actress next month from America who has never yet played on English boards: we require a new piece for her—something original, startling, galvanic. I told Mr. Bowles, only last night, our best chance would be a piece from an untried hand. Will you undertake it? As I said before, if *you* will write, I can engage that *he* shall read."

"But I don't understand stage-business," objected Gerard, more than half disposed to comply. "I know nothing about your prompter's box, your cues, your exits and entrances, your ins and outs, and the rest of it. I'm afraid I should make a rare mess, even if I could manage the plot."

"Pooh! pooh! not a bit of it!" answered the actor. "I'll put you right on all those matters of mere detail. I have an especial gift for what I call 'drilling a company.'

You set to work, write the piece, have it ready in a fortnight, and I'll answer for all the rest."

"Can't you give me a hint or two?" said Gerard, a little alarmed at the magnitude of the undertaking into which he was about to plunge.

"Hints!" replied the actor; "hundreds of them! But they're no use. Look ye here, sir. The whole secret of success lies in three words. Shall I repeat them? First, situation! Second, situation! Third, situation! Startle your audience—that's the way to treat 'em, sir—and keep 'em startled all through. Plot! what's the use of a plot? Nobody understands it, nor would care to attend to it if they did. Improbabilities! you can't have too many of 'em. What the devil do people go to the play for, but to see something different from real life? Drown your characters in a wash-hand basin, cut their throats with the door-scraper, or blow them to atoms with an Armstrong gun out of a four-post bed! Don't be afraid of it. Give us something to wonder at; but keep all your action as much as possible in one place, and mind nobody's on the stage for more than two minutes at a time. The less they have to say the better. We'll take care there's soft music playing all through. It's easier for the author, and pleasanter to the audience. I don't think I can tell you anything more. Waiter, the bill, and another small glass of brandy. I must wish you good-morning now. I've to be at rehearsal in an hour. Keep in mind what I've said, and your play will run three hundred nights, though it hasn't a leg to stand on. Adieu!"

So Mr. Barrington-Belgrave swaggered off, and Gerard betook himself to his melancholy lodging, somewhat inspirited by the new opening he espied, and wondering how it was that Mrs. Vandeleur, though she had grown more beautiful than ever, should have looked so exactly like the picture of her he had been wearing in his heart for more years now than he liked to count.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ORIGINAL COMPOSITION

THOUGH as yet but a few weeks old at the trade, Gerard Ainslie, I fear, had already contracted a vice which appears more or less the result of all continuous literary labour — namely, an ignoble tendency to become chary of material, to use many words for the expression of few ideas, and to beat out the gilding itself very thin, so as to cover the greatest possible amount of surface. Tale-writing, even for such a paper as the *Holborn Gazette*, was a pursuit less likely to encourage than exhaust fertility of invention, and our new-fledged author sat down to his deal writing-table with an overwhelming sense of the difficulties he had before him. Gerard was far too wise, however, to think of abandoning his late career in favour of the new opening offered by Mr. Barrington-Belgrave. Under any circumstances he would stick to the *Holborn Gazette* so long as it produced a regular salary. Bread and cheese were hard enough to get. He resolved not to leave go of the one while he made a grasp at the other ; so he began to ponder how that same beating-out process, so essential to the making up of his weekly task, might be brought to bear on the construction of a melodrama, gorgeous, of course, in decoration ; characteristic, if possible, in dialogue and costume; but above all, as he remembered with a sigh, startling in its situations !

He recalled the expression of Mr. Barrington-Belgrave's large, close-shaven, beetle-browed face, while insisting on this particular essential. He remembered the solemnity, not entirely owing to brandy and water, of this enthusiast while he warned his pupil that extravagance, however glaring, was preferable to common-place; he recollected the examples adduced as stimulants to the attention of a British audience, and his heart sank within him while he pondered. But, as I said before, he had already learned some of the tricks of the trade; and it occurred to him, after brief consideration, that he might make a tale of mystery and

horror, on which he was then engaged for the *Holborn Gazette*, answer the double purpose of a thrilling romance and a new drama.

One fellow's hero, as Lord Dundreary would say, is very like another fellow's hero ; and, after all, ring the changes on them how you will, there is but little variety, except in dress, amongst the puppets that make up the interest of imaginative literature, whether for the library or the stage. You will find in *Ivanhoe*, for instance—and I name that romance because everybody has read it, and with equal interest—you will find, I say, in *Ivanhoe* the regular stock characters necessary for the construction of every narrative and every plot. If you look for anything beyond these, you will have considerable difficulty in hitting on it. First, there is Wilfrid himself, the hero, pure and simple, type of strength, courage, address, rectitude, modesty, and good looks. Would he not have been Sir Gawain at the round table, Sir Charles Grandison in the last century, and more fire-eating dandies than I can name in all the novels of the present? Dickens has got him a situation as an usher at a Yorkshire school ; Thackeray taught him to paint, sent him to Charterhouse, and married him to Rowena instead of Rebecca, though he took him out of *that* scrape too before the end of the third volume ; while Lever, remembering certain proclivities for spur and spear, purchased his commission, and shipped him off to serve under the Great Duke in the uniform of an Irish dragoon. We might pursue the parallel through every one of the characters who attended the tournament at Ashby-de-la-Zouch. There is the Black Knight, strong, good-tempered, and not burdened with wisdom ; Front-de-Bœuf, strong, bad-tempered, and totally devoid of scruple. Have we not seen the one with bare neck and glazed hat, the other in high boots and broad black belt, whenever the nautical drama sets Jack Hearty, the bluejacket, in opposition to Paul Perilous, the pirate? Bois Guilbert—and so far the Templar's title remains equally appropriate—has of late become a lawyer, but the sort of lawyer who keeps prussic acid in his inkstand, and a six-shooter in his blue bag. Is not Bracy the Lovelace of *Clarissa Harlowe*, and the Sir Charles Coldstream of *Lady Clutterbuck*? Parson Adams was no heavier a bruiser, and scarcely more respectable a priest, than the Clerk of Copmanhurst. Gurth and Wamba have worn the powder and plush of every livery in vogue since the first French Revolution. Cedric of Rotherwood has come down to farm his own estate of less than a hundred acres ; and Ethelred the Unready has

been so often before the footlights at the shortest notice, and in such various guise, that he deserves rather to be called Vertumnus the Versatile.

With regard to the ladies, for many centuries we have been limited to two classes of heroines—the dark-eyed and affectionate, the blue-eyed and coy. Rowena and Rebecca must be quite tired of dressing over and over again for their parts ; and if for nothing else, we owe Miss Braddon a mine of gratitude that she has introduced us at last to a more original style—to a young person with a good deal of red in her hair, and a refreshing contempt for many of our long-cherished superstitions, including those inculcated by the Church Catechism, though it must be admitted that, however fascinating she may make her wicked witches, the right moral is always skilfully worked out in the end.

If Gerard Ainslie had ever read Miss Braddon's novels, he would of course have seized on anyone he found untouched, and turned it into an original play of his own composition ; but there is little time for study at the diggings, and he found himself cast on the meagre resources of his intellect instead. So he sat down, and proceeded to convert his half-written story into a melodrama in three acts, with three situations in each act, the whole to be played over in less than two hours and a quarter. Obviously, the dialogue need distress him but little. Interjections would do most of that. No, those indispensable situations were what filled him with misgiving and dismay.

His own story was of the present time; he intended to lay the scene of his drama early in the seventeenth century. This became a matter of trifling importance when he reflected that he need but change the dresses of his characters, and make them speak the few words they had to say in rather more high-flown language. It is always supposed that the later we go back into history, the less we find the tone of ordinary conversation differing from our advertisements of the present day.

There was but little modification needed in this respect, for the readers of the *Holborn Gazette* would have been ill-satisfied without flowery phrases, and long magniloquent periods, just as they thought but little of any domestic story in which the principal personages were not of exalted rank in the peerage. The tale which Gerard was now preparing afforded them a duke, who kept in close confinement (and this just outside of Belgrave Square) a marchioness in her own right, of whom there are indeed not a great many going

about at a time, never suffering her to leave the house, which was perhaps the reason why the artist who illustrated her on wood for the vignettes depicted her under all emergencies in a court dress with feathers and a fan,—the duke himself wearing loose trousers, and a frock coat, in the breast of which he studiously concealed his right hand. There was to be nobody in the book of inferior station to a baronet, except the duke's dishonest steward, and he was to die about the middle of the second volume, tortured by remorse, though worth half a million of money.

It would be superfluous to go into the plot of Gerard's novel, but it seemed improbable enough to furnish him with the necessary situations for his play, so down he sat to those labours of curtailment, alteration, and disguise, with which such original efforts of the intellect are produced.

It was to be called by the high-sounding title of *Pope Clement; or, the Cardinal's Collapse*, and the situations he trusted would prove startling enough to satisfy the requirements of Mr. Barrington-Belgrave himself. Of these perhaps the least remarkable were the Pope's discovery of the cardinal on his knees to a young lady, disguised as a peasant, who had come to confess; the head of the Catholic Church presiding over a council table, under which was concealed on all-fours an Italian brigand, who proved afterwards, as the plot developed itself, to be the cardinal's own son; lastly, the attempted assassination of this cardinal in the gloomy recesses of the Vatican by that unnatural child, whose hand is seized, when on the verge of parricide, by the young lady formerly disguised as a peasant, with whom father and son are both in love, but who, preferring the younger admirer, of course, seeks and finds him here very successfully by torchlight.

It is not to be supposed that such dramatic extravagances were the offspring of Gerard's unassisted brain. On the contrary, he received almost daily visits from Mr. Barrington-Belgrave, who displayed a touching interest in the work, pruning dialogues, offering suggestions, and consuming a good many brandies-and-sodas the while. The torchlight scene, indeed, was born chiefly of effects produced by that imaginative stimulant. In less than a fortnight the drama was pronounced ready for perusal, and Mr. Barrington-Belgrave having previously treated the author to another heavy breakfast, led him off in triumph to the stage-manager's residence, for inspection and possible approval, or, as he happily expressed it, "on sale or return."

The Accordion Theatre stood in the immediate neighbourhood of Seven Dials. It is needless to observe that Mr. Bowles, on whom devolved all the responsibility and nine-tenths of the trouble connected with that place of amusement, lived as far off as possible from the scene of his labours. After a long walk, terminating in the remote regions of Clapham Rise, Gerard Ainslie found himself waiting in the front parlour of a neat little two-storied house, trying not to hear what was said by Messrs. Bowles and Belgrave in the next room about his own composition. It was difficult, however, to avoid distinguishing the low tones of the actor's voice, obviously urging extenuating circumstances, in reply to the manager's higher notes, rising with a noble scorn into such expressions as these: "Impracticable! Impossible! Hangs fire! Drags like a dredging-net! Don't tell me; I can see that without reading it! Look what a business we made of the last. Devilish nearly lost us Kate Carmine;—cost me the doubling of her salary. What the devil did you bring him to *me* for? However, the Boss will be here at the half-hour. I'll lay the blame on him. See him? Well, I don't mind. Devilish gentlemanlike fellow, of course. These poor, broken-down chaps always are. Ask him to step in."

So Gerard stepped in, and found himself face to face with a thin, quiet, well-bred man, who expressed in a tone as different as possible from that which he had heard through the folding-doors, first, regret at having kept him waiting, next, pleasure in making his acquaintance, and lastly, grave doubts whether the play under discussion, though denoting genius, would be adapted, without considerable alteration, to the company and resources of the Accordion.

Mr. Barrington-Belgrave's face brightened. He knew the manager, and this sounded a little more hopeful. Not only did he take an interest in the production of *Pope Clement* on Gerard's account, but he was also persuaded that the character of the brigand was specially adapted to his own talents; and he had, indeed, offered several suggestions during the composition of the piece, with a view of electrifying a London audience by his rendering of that part. Gerard, watching his friend's countenance, took courage, and offered humbly enough to alter his work in any way that might be pointed out.

"You must give us two more women's parts," suggested Mr. Bowles; "or, let me see—pages. Yes, pages will do better. Can you put in a couple of pages, with something to say? You know," he added, looking at the actor for

corroboration, "I can't keep Lydia Goddard and little Jessie White idle; and they draw well, in boy's dresses, both of them."

"Nothing easier!" answered Gerard, wondering in his heart how he should get them in.

"Then there's Violante. Ain't that her name? Yes, Violante. You'll have to kill her. She's no use if you don't kill her. Miss Carmine is the only *die-er* out this season. I don't think—I do not think we could persuade Miss Carmine to take a part without a die in it. Then about Mrs. Golightly. There's nothing for Mrs. Golightly. No! She would never condescend to play the Pope. I fear it's impossible. I'm really afraid we must give it up, or at anyrate put it off to another season. Excuse me; there's the door-bell."

Mr. Barrington-Belgrave, watching Gerard's face, which had grown of late sadly worn and pale, was surprised to see it flush at the sound of a voice in the passage.

Next moment the door opened, and the Boss, as Mr. Bowles called him, entered the room.

That gentleman saluted Mr. Belgrave with his usual courtesy; then stood transfixed, and gaping, in speechless surprise.

Our dramatic author broke the silence first.

"Why, Dolly!" said he, "I had no idea that I should ever see you again."

To which the other only answered, "Gerard!" but in a tone of astonishment that spoke volumes.

It is needless to observe, Gerard's play was accepted forthwith. Mr. Egremont, who liked to be busy, had taken upon himself the superior management of the Accordion Theatre; finding the money, of course, but otherwise impeding its efficiency in every possible way; and Dolly was not a man to lose such a chance of helping an old friend at a pinch. It was wonderful how quickly Mr. Bowles's difficulties melted into air. The part of Violante should be kept for Miss Carmine, failing the American star, whose advent still seemed uncertain. The two young ladies who affected young gentlemen's dresses must take whatever parts they were offered, and be thankful. Lastly, if Mrs. Golightly did not choose to play Pope Clement she might let it alone, and see the performance from the front.

To Mr. Barrington-Belgrave's exceeding admiration, the real manager and the inexperienced playwright walked out arm-in-arm, the former observing, as he jumped into the hansom-cab waiting at the door, "Good-bye, old man; I've

got your address written down here. I wish you could come with me and see the Cup run for. I never was so pleased in my life. We'll meet to-morrow. Take care of yourself." Then, through the little trap-door overhead, "Nine Elms! As hard as you can go. You've just twenty minutes to do it in. Shove on!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE CUP DAY

WHO that is doomed to spend the sweet summer-time in London would miss a Cup day at Ascot, provided he had leisure to make holiday and means for enjoying it? Certainly not Dolly Egremont, whose whole nature stirred and softened to country influences and country scenes, nowhere so powerful, nowhere so delightful, as in the neighbourhood of Windsor Forest. Long before the first week in June, Dolly used to find himself pining for cowslip fragrance, and butter-cup glitter, in waving meadow-grass; for hawthorn, pink and white, on thick green hedges; for golden laburnum trailing across clean cottage windows, and lilacs drooping over bright red-brick walls. Ah! the Cockneys are the people to enjoy the country. And Dolly Egremont loved to boast he was Cockney enough to delight even in the ponds about Wandsworth, and the fresh, wild, prairie-like expanse of Barnes Common. As for racing,—well, racing is good fun enough in its way, providing your ventures on that uncertain sport are limited to a sovereign with your friend, or a box of Houbigant's gloves for "the small white hand" that, alas! may be "never your own!" And Dolly liked to look at a good horse as well as most other Englishmen, while, knowing but little of the animal's points, he admired it, perhaps, all the more, and certainly formed a clearer notion of its probable success. Whereas old Cotherstone, who had been breeding thoroughbred stock ever since he came of age, and boasted himself what they call at Newmarket one of your make-and-shape men, backed his own opinion freely, losing thereby with considerable spirit. Indeed, for the two-year-old scrambles at Northampton and elsewhere, he was so consistently in the wrong as to have become a proverb. It was Dolly's good fortune to meet this veteran sportsman in the train. He might have reaped a good deal of information as to weights, distances, and that mysterious property racing men call form, had his thoughts not been elsewhere. Old Cotherstone voted

him a capital listener, and prosed on with a perseverance that, to use his habitual jargon, would have convinced the meanest capacity of his powers to stay a distance; but Dolly, looking out at window on his own side of the carriage, was pondering on other silks than those which flutter down the straight to be marshalled by a patient starter waving a red flag, of other matches than those which carry weight for age, and of a race run on different conditions from Derby, Oaks, or Ascot Cup —a race not always to the swift, but for which hare and tortoise start on equal terms; in which the loser is sometimes less to be pitied than the winner, and of which the settling, however long put off, is sure to be heavy, if not unsatisfactory, at last.

Dolly, you see, notwithstanding his jovial, prosperous appearance, considered himself at this time the bounden slave of a damsel who has already appeared in these pages under the name of Miss Tregunter. He had even arrived at calling her Jane, but this only in his dreams. That eligible young person had expressed an intention of appearing at Ascot with the rest of the world on the Cup day, and Dolly, judging by analogy, expected great results from the romantic influences of scenery, sunshine, sentiment, judicious flattery, lobster-salad, and champagne-cup.

Miss Tregunter was an heiress. To do him justice, Dolly often wished she was not. The field would have been clearer of rivals, and, as his attachment was really disinterested, he would have liked to convince her his admiration was solely for herself. To-day he meant to say something very marked indeed; he had not the remotest idea what. No wonder, therefore, he listened so gravely to Cotherstone's *resumé* of the racing season up to the present meeting, concluding with a declaration that one could always prophesy these latter triumphs from the performances of horses in the spring.

"Ah!" said Dolly, waking out of a brown study, and clothing his thoughts as usual in a garbled quotation from one of his favourite poets,—

> "In the spring a young man's fancy
> Lightly turns to thoughts of love;
> Dam by Stockwell out of Nancy—
> How they squeeze and how they shove!"

Old Cotherstone stared at this dovetailing of his own conversation, his companion's thoughts, and the pressure they were forced to undergo on emerging from the train at the narrow entrance to the course. Here, however, they

separated, the elder man to penetrate the betting-ring and find out what they were laying about Hyacinth for the Cup, the younger to purchase "cards of the running horses, names, weights, and colours of the riders," for immediate presentation to his ladye-love.

We are more interested at present in the less business-like performance of the two, and will follow Mr. Egremont to the grand stand, where ladies now sit in their private boxes much as they sat some eighteen hundred years ago to smile on the dying gladiator in the amphitheatre—some dozen centuries later to wince and shrink, looking down pale and pretty, on splintered lance and rolling charger in the tilt-yard—last week, and week before, and every week in the season, to whisper, and flirt, and fan themselves, complaining softly of the heat, at the Italian Opera.

Dolly's heart beat faster when he reached Mrs. Vandeleur's box, for under that lady's wing, as having long attained matronly rank, he knew he should find Miss Tregunter; and the boots that had seemed to fit him so well when he left home, the coat in which even Curlewis could find no fault when he tried it on yesterday, failed all at once to give him the confidence they had hitherto inspired. Of course he blundered in headlong. Of course he offered but a distant greeting to the person he cared for most, but accosted her friend and chaperon with extraordinary cordiality and affection. I suppose women understand these things, but it has always puzzled me how a real attachment can be brought to a happy conclusion, because a man never appears to such disadvantage as in the presence of the woman he loves.

Dolly, however, was safe enough with Mrs. Vandeleur. They were fast friends. Such friends as man and woman only become when there can be no question of love-making between them. Where the heart is touched, there is always a certain element of strife. He was the only gentleman in the box. She tried her best to put him at his ease, and made a place for him by Miss Tregunter, who looked quite captivating in a pale pink dress, like a half-blown hawthorn.

"I see you stick to your colours," said Dolly nervously, and showing his own more than was becoming, in his round cheeks. "I remember you wore pink the first time I ever met you."

"And you thought it pretty," answered Miss Tregunter with a bright smile, hurrying thereafter, as ladies will, to a safer subject. "Can't you mark the winners for me Mr.

Egremont? Can't you tell me what I ought to back for the Cup?"

"It's not much in my line," answered Dolly, wishing for the moment he had sunk his whole patrimony in a string of racehorses; "but there's a man who can put you on a good thing," pointing to Cotherstone, who had shut his book, and was labouring through the mass of ladies on the lawn. "May I beckon him up here?" he asked Mrs. Vandeleur.

"Lord Cotherstone?" replied Norah. "Of course you may. He's a great friend of mine, though we never meet but twice a year. Does he see you? How lame he walks. We'll give him some luncheon. Here he is."

While she spoke the racing veteran tapped at the box-door, to be received with the *empressement* due to such an oracle, from whose lips every word that fell was worth at least a dozen pair of gloves.

"Hyacinth!" he exclaimed in accents hoarse with the shouting of many meetings, to answer a timid suggestion from Miss Tregunter. "Don't you believe it. Don't you back him, Mrs. Vandeleur. Let him alone, both of you. Yes, he's a good-looking one enough, and he's a smart horse for a mile; but he's no use here. He'll never get up the hill in a week. No back ribs, and not very game when he's collared. I don't often give an opinion, but I bred him, you know, and I've got his form to a pound."

Miss Tregunter looked disappointed. Was it that she had taken a fancy to Hyacinth's beautiful shape, or because Dandy Burton, who always made up to her, with or without encouragement, now stepped into their box? or could she have disapproved of Dolly's conduct in taking advantage of the stir thus created to whisper something for Mrs. Vandeleur's exclusive information? Something that made Norah turn deadly pale, and crumple to shreds the race-card in her hand.

It was a short sentence, and had Miss Tregunter heard it distinctly, would have interested her, I believe, but little.

Turning his back on the others, Dolly whispered in low, hurried syllables, "I have seen Gerard Ainslie. He is in London—very poor. You shall have his address this evening." Then, true to his kindly instincts, honest Dolly, sorely against his inclination, quitted the box, leaving Dandy Burton literally a fair field and no favour with the heiress. That gentleman was called Dandy Burton still, and doubtless deserved the title honestly enough. He had left the Life

Guards for some time, having found, indeed, that service far less to his taste than he imagined before he joined. Truth to tell, the Dandy was not quite a good enough fellow for the Household Brigade, with whom no amount of coxcombry will go down unless it conceals frank manliness of character beneath its harmless affectations. When Burton first made acquaintance with his new comrades, these did all in their power to train him into what soldiers call the right sort of cornet. They quizzed his boots, they crabbed his riding, they corked his eyebrows, and they made hay in his room! But it was all to no purpose; and though they neither quarrelled with nor rendered him uncomfortable, everybody was satisfied he would not stop long. So after a year or two he sold out, to make way for a merry blue-eyed boy, fresh from Eton, who could do "thimble-rig," "prick the garter," "bones" with his face blacked, and various other accomplishments; who feared nothing, respected nobody on earth, besides the colonel, but his own corporal-major, and suited the corps, as he himself expressed it, down to the ground.

Burton's present profession, however, as the dandy pure and simple, going about London, was far more to his taste than the military duties of Knightsbridge and Windsor. Not another of the "trade" was more beautifully dressed and turned out that day upon the course, and nobody could have been more satisfied of his correct appearance than himself.

"Unwisely weaves that takes two webbes in hand," says Spenser; but Burton, disregarding such wholesome advice, no sooner found himself in Mrs. Vandeleur's box, with old Cotherstone and the two ladies, than he proceeded to play the double game in which he believed himself a proficient. His admiration, and whatever little sentiment he could muster, were doubtless given to Mrs. Vandeleur. But he had a great idea of marrying the heiress. So, with an audacity that could only arise from utter ignorance of feminine nature, he began to make running with two women at the same time, who were fast friends, and neither of whom cared the least bit for him in her heart.

He tried Miss Tregunter first; but the young lady's eyes "were with her heart, and that was far away." They were following Dolly's broad form as it traversed the course, which was even now being cleared for the great race, and she vouchsafed not a single look to the Dandy. Then he engaged Mrs. Vandeleur, still exchanging last words with Lord Cotherstone, whose hand was on the door, and here

he was less unfortunate. She turned more graciously towards him than usual.

"Will you do me a favour, Mr. Burton?" asked this White Witch, in her most seductive accents.

"What is there I would not do for you?" naturally answered the Dandy, modulating his voice, however, so that Miss Tregunter should not hear.

"Thanks," replied Norah, with a bright smile. "Run down, please, amongst those noisy ring people, and bet two hundred pounds for me against Hyacinth. Lord Cotherstone says it is two to one. That means I shall win a hundred pounds, don't it?"

"Certainly," answered Burton, "if it comes off. I'll book it for you in five minutes."

"And—and—Mr. Burton," added the lady, with the colour rising to her cheek and the light to her eyes, "Lord Cotherstone is a very good judge, isn't he? Will you do it twice over? I'm sure Hyacinth can't win."

So Burton walked solemnly down into the betting-ring, and laid four hundred to two against the favourite, while Mrs. Vandeleur, leaning back in her chair, shut her eyes for forty blissful seconds, thinking how by this time to-morrow Gerard Ainslie would have received a couple of hundred through a safe hand, anonymously, "from a friend."

Men are apt enough to be over-sanguine; but the amount of chickens counted by women, even before the eggs are laid, defies calculation.

People dropped in and went out, but Norah heeded them very little, for the horses had already taken their canters, and were marshalled for the start. A pang of misgiving shot through her when Hyacinth went sweeping down, blooming like a rainbow and elastic as an eel.

"Why, he's as beautiful as the flower they call him by!" said Miss Tregunter.

"Never mind," answered Norah; "Lord Cotherstone must know, and it's sure to be all right!"

I will not take upon me to describe this or any other race for the Ascot Cup, inasmuch as the crowd has hitherto prevented my seeing any part of these contests but the last fifty yards. In the present instance the struggle at the hill was exceedingly severe; horses were changing their legs, while whip and spur were going a quarter of a mile from home. Hyacinth, however, who had been lying back till the distance, came out directly his jockey called on him,

and won with apparent ease amidst shouts that might have been heard at Hyde Park Corner.

The ring were hit very hard, and Mrs. Vandeleur lost four hundred pounds! Burton, making his way back to her box, stumbled against Lord Cotherstone. The latter, of course, defended his own judgment in defiance of the event.

"I told you the Porpoise wasn't fit," said he. "If they could have galloped Porpoise yesterday, Lifeboat would have made the running for him, and Hyacinth must have come in a bad third!"

The next person Dandy met was his old fellow-pupil; but Dolly seemed too preoccupied to answer the question put in a whisper by his friend, "What was it you said to her in the box that made Mrs. Vandeleur turn so pale?"

CHAPTER XXXV

TIGHT SHOES

ALAS! that the misery of those pinches, proverbially unsuspected save by the wearer, should be confined to no particular style of *chaussure*, but prove as insupportable under satin sandal as waterproof boot. I doubt if Cinderella herself was thoroughly comfortable in her glass-slippers, and have always been persuaded that she kicked one of them off while leaving the ballroom partly in excusable coquetry, and partly because it was too tight! With handsome Mrs. Vandeleur too, the White Rose of my story, the metaphorical shoe pinched very closely during the height of the London season in which Hyacinth earned his immortality as a race-horse by winning the Ascot Cup. It was a shoe, moreover, possessing the peculiar property of misfitting chiefly on Monday mornings, at monthly intervals, when she paid her household accounts, looked into her expenditure, and found that even her liberal fortune was insufficient to make both ends meet. This inconvenience might be accounted for in many ways. The prettiest house in London is not likely to be hired at a low rent; good taste in furniture cannot be indulged without lavish expenditure; if people insist on giving charming little dinners of eight two or three times a week, cooks' wages and wine-merchants' accounts soon run into units, tens, hundreds, not to mention bills delivered by poulterers, pickle-makers, and purveyors of good things round the corner; high-stepping horses are seldom attainable under three figures, and Mr. Barker, as indeed his name would seem to imply, opens his mouth rather wide when he builds, repairs, paints, varnishes, or otherwise refits the carriages he turns out so effectually. Add to these luxuries of life such necessaries as bonnets, ball-dresses, bracelets, and other jewellery to wear or give away; take boxes at the opera, and join water-parties at Richmond whenever the whim seizes yourself or friends; be careful to abstain from nothing that charms the fancy or pleases the eye; never pay your

bills till the end of the second year, and I will take upon me to predict you will soon find the shoe so tight, that the difficulty is how to get it off at all.

What a pretty little shoe it was with which Mrs. Vandeleur kicked away the footstool under her writing-table, ere she rose to refresh herself with a look in the glass, after poring over her accounts! What a beautiful face she saw there, pale indeed, and with its hair pushed far back after an hour's bewildering study, but lit up by a smile that it had not shown for years, that reminded even herself of the Norah Welby winding silks on the lawn at Marston, under the summer lime-trees, long ago!

"It's a bore too!" she murmured, "and what I hate is being mixed up in money matters with a man. But I can always manage somehow, and then, poor fellow! I like to think I have made him tolerably comfortable. How he must wonder! and it's too nice of dear fat Dolly to manage it all so cleverly. Gracious! that reminds me, the fancy ball is to-morrow, and I've never written to Jane!" So she sprang back to her table, bundled the pile of accounts into a drawer, where it would take at least an hour's work to arrange them for inspection on some future occasion, and spreading a sheet of notepaper, smooth, sweet-scented, and crested with a monogram like a centipede, scrawled off the following effusion :—

"I am in despair, darling, about missing you — I waited at home all the morning, and begin to fear now some bother has prevented your getting away. I have heaps of business to talk over, but long to see you besides on your own account, that you may tell me all about yourself—we shall meet to-morrow, so nobody must find out you came here so lately—the disguise is perfect! and I am sure will answer our purpose. Are we not dreadfully deceitful? but when people pry, and gossip, and try to sound one's servants, it seems all fair. Don't answer, please! it might create suspicion.—Ever your loving

"Norah Vandeleur."

While she signed her name, Miss Tregunter and luncheon were announced simultaneously. Mrs. Vandeleur, pushing the note hastily aside, ran out to meet her friend on the stairs, and turn her back for that meal, which is, with ladies, the most important in the day. So down they sat in the pretty dining-room, to demolish roast chicken and light claret, while they talked volubly of their own doings and their friends, with as little reserve as if Robert Smart and his confederate, faultlessly powdered, were a couple of mutes; or the portly butler, who condescended to pour them out their wine (wondering the while how they could drink such thin stuff), was ignorant of all social scandal, and averse to dis-

seminating it, betraying thereby but a superficial acquaintance with the character of that domestic. Presently, Jane Tregunter, eating jelly with grapes stuck in it, and wearying perhaps of others' love affairs, began gradually to work round in the direction of her own.

"You'll go, dear," said this young lady affectionately, "you promised, and I know you are to be trusted. I shouldn't like to be disappointed, I own. You see, I—I've never been at a fancy ball."

"I was writing to you about it when you arrived," answered Norah: "now I may tear my letter up, for it don't matter. Disappoint you, dear! Why should you think I would? I've done everything about the dresses—I'm certain nobody will know us. You've no idea what a difference powder makes, and it's so becoming! I shall be very much surprised, Jane, if somebody don't collapse altogether. I think to-morrow will be an eventful evening."

"Patches, and a pink satin petticoat," mused Miss Tregunter, "it does sound very pretty, Norah; but nobody will look at me," she added honestly enough, "if we're both dressed alike."

"That is your modesty!" answered Mrs. Vandeleur heartily. "I'm an old woman, you know, now, and my staunchest admirers are getting tired of me. Even Mr. Egremont has deserted my standard this season. Don't you think so, Jane?"

Jane blushed, and looked pleased. Perhaps it was not exclusively love for her hostess that made her so happy in Mrs. Vandeleur's house. The latter was an old and sincere friend of Dolly's—no rival, though sometimes feared as such for an instant at a time, and a capital go-between. Miss Tregunter swallowed her jelly, wiped her mouth, and walked round the table to give the White Rose a kiss, an operation witnessed by Robert, who entered at that moment to change her plate, without eliciting the slightest token of surprise.

"You're very good to me, Norah," said she affectionately, "and I think you guess something. I'm not sure whether your guess is right, but I don't mind telling you I should not be angry if it was—what makes you think, dear, that somebody—well—that Mr. Egremont will be at the fancy ball?"

"Because I'm not blind, my dear," answered Mrs. Vandeleur; "no more is he—I think he is quite right, and I think you will be quite wrong if you snub him. Depend upon it, he's worth a dozen of the other one!"

Miss Tregunter looked puzzled.

"What other one?" she asked; "do you mean Mr. Burton, Norah? don't you like Mr. Burton?"

On the tip of Mrs. Vandeleur's tongue was a frank disclaimer, but she remembered, with a twinge of dissatisfaction, how this gentleman had of late been concerned in several money matters on her account—how he had made bets for her at Tattersall's, gambled for her in railway shares, and speculated with her money or his own, she was not quite sure which, in one or two unremunerative ventures east of Temple Bar; also, how they met continually in public, while he called at her house nearly every day, so she could not consistently give vent to the truth, which was that she wished him at the bottom of the sea.

"Like him, dear?" she repeated, with a hesitation so foreign to her usual frank outspoken manner as to puzzle Miss Tregunter more and more; "well, I like him, and I don't like him. I think he's very disagreeable sometimes, but then, you know, he's such an old acquaintance—I've known him so long, and he's exceedingly obliging—altogether"—

"Norah, dear," interrupted her friend, with unusual energy, "you won't be affronted at what I'm going to say. I've often wanted to speak about it, but I never had courage. Take my advice, and keep clear of Mr. Burton. I don't know the world so well as you do, but I know him. He makes up to me, dear, awfully! and I hate him for it! It's only because I've some money. I'll tell you how I found that out some day. So different from the other. Norah, dear, don't be angry! People are beginning to talk about you and him. Aunt Margaret told Theresa you were in love with him, and even dear old Lady Baker made her repeat the whole story, and said she knew there was some truth in it, for he was never out of the house. I was so angry I could have thumped them, Theresa and all! I thought I'd tell you, and if you're offended I shall cry for a week—there! And if he knew it, I do believe he'd poison me in a strawberry-ice to-morrow evening; there's no crime that man would stick at, if he was sure of not being found out. Hush! talk of the—Dandy! Now I'll run away, dear—you're not angry, I see—good-bye, darling, and take care of yourself."

So Miss Tregunter made her escape from the ground-floor, while Mrs. Vandeleur went upstairs, to confront the gentleman of whom her friend held so unflattering an opinion, in the drawing-room, to which apartment he had been shown by Mr. Smart, ere that well-drilled servant announced his arrival to the ladies below. For the first time in her life

Norah met her visitor with some little feeling of vexation and constraint. Hitherto she had considered him a moderately pleasant but decidedly useful acquaintance, had ignored his selfishness, smiled at his vanity, and tolerated him contentedly enough; but to-day, something in her woman's nature rose in fierce rebellion against the assumption of intimacy, the affectation of more than friendly interest she was conscious he displayed. Every woman, I believe, likes to be made love to, until her heart is engaged elsewhere, and then, with a fine sense of justice, she turns round and resents as an insult the admiration hitherto graciously accepted as a tribute to her sovereignty. It is but fair, however, to say that Norah had never yet detected in Mr. Burton's manner anything warmer than the cordiality of long-established friendship. It was Jane Tregunter's appeal that to-day, for the first time, put the possibility of his presumption into her head, and she felt she disliked him extremely, although he had saved her so much trouble in business matters, nay, even although he had been educated by the same private tutor as Gerard Ainslie!

He came quickly across the room when she entered, masking, as it seemed, some confusion under a gayer manner than usual. "How well you look!" he exclaimed, taking her hand with a good deal of *empressement.* "You grow more beautiful every day. I came to talk business, and you put it all out of my head."

She liked him none the better for the vapid compliment. It had not the ring of the true metal, and perhaps she would have valued it no more had it been sterling gold. Sitting down a long way off, she answered icily enough—

"If you come on business, let us get it over at once, for my carriage is ordered in ten minutes. If you want to talk nonsense," she added, thinking she was rather severe, "you are too late—Miss Tregunter is just gone, and it's thrown away upon me."

"Miss Tregunter!" replied the Dandy in a tone of assumed disgust; "who would ever think of Miss Tregunter in comparison with you?" but observing a peculiar expression of scorn about Norah's eyebrows, he added judiciously, "My business will soon be over, and you can go for your drive. Here are the bills; you can look through them at your leisure. I am afraid, as a matter of form, I must ask you for a receipt."

She crossed to the writing-table.

"How very odd!" said she, rummaging over its littered surface, "I'm certain I left it here. What can have become

of it? Never mind. It isn't wanted after all, for Jane has been—there's the receipt, Mr. Burton. Is it dated right? I haven't half thanked you for your trouble; and now tell me when do you think this money will have to be paid?"

He had turned away nervously while she was at the writing-table, but he forced himself to look her straight in the face.

"When?" he repeated. "Why, after Goodwood—we shall win a hatful of money on the Stakes, and I've let the Cup alone, because I don't see my way. You've no idea what an interest I feel in the thing, now that I have a real inducement to success."

She felt she was in a false position, and she hated it. She knew she was deeply involved, and that it would take more than a year's income to free herself from her obligations to Dandy Burton. It was provoking, irritating beyond measure, but not humiliating, because she had sacrificed her independence for his comfort whom she must never see again, but whom she still so dearly loved. "And if I lose at Goodwood," said she, pondering, "these people won't wait?"

"They must! they shall!" answered the Dandy vehemently; "don't be anxious — don't distress yourself, dear Mrs. Vandeleur, trust to me; there is nothing in the world I wouldn't do for you!"

She thanked him coldly enough. It was getting worse and worse, she thought. Her servant came in to say the carriage was at the door, and in common decency her visitor could stay no longer, but he bowed over her hand, when she wished him good-bye, till his lips almost touched it, and Norah's sensitive perceptions detected in his manner a bold confidence, an assured air of success, that angered her to the core. Running upstairs to put on her bonnet, she struck her clenched hand hard against the banisters, a display of temper very unusual, and denoting that she was deeply moved. She gave a little sigh of relief, though, when the street door closed, and proceeded calmly enough to make her afternoon toilet.

Burton, emerging on the pavement, took a paper from his pocket, and after reading it with rather a strange smile, bestowed it carefully in his notecase. This paper had no address, but was written in Norah Vandeleur's bold and somewhat straggling hand.

CHAPTER XXXVI

NON CUIVIS

IT was getting late in the afternoon, and high time for the Park, if he meant to go there at all; so Mr. Burton straightened his waist, looked admiringly at his boots, and proceeded into the Park by way of Albert Gate, with that air of supreme indifference and imperturbable equanimity affected by his order towards sundown. No wonder a frank, jovial manner is so highly appreciated in London; no wonder the free, kindly, energetic character called a cheery fellow should be so popular. Refreshing as it is rare, his pleasant greeting puts you in good humour with yourself, with him, with things in general, with the score of friends in particular whom you had almost voted a minute ago the twenty greatest bores in the world!

But the Dandy's form, as Lord Cotherstone would have said, was hardly good enough to admit of his being perfectly natural; it was his custom therefore to intrench himself in an impenetrable and rather contemptuous reserve, which imposed on the public and answered its purpose remarkably well. Mediocrity, you see, if you will only be proud of it, cultivating it assiduously like any other advantage, possesses a certain inert force of its own. Everybody knows people accept you for what you say you are worth, and if you never attempt to succeed, of course you need never fail. It is so easy then, and so agreeable, sitting far back amongst the equestrian benches, to criticise the gladiators in the arena below, depreciating this one's courage, and that one's bearing, and the wretched fighting of a third, inferring, by implication, how much better you could do it all yourself, were it but worth while to try. Something of this principle had carried Burton hitherto successfully enough through the world in which he moved. Walking up the Ride now, well-dressed, well-looking, well-

mannered, he obtained his full share of bows and smiles from thorough-bred women sweeping by on thorough-bred horses—of familiar nods and "how-d'ye-do's" from lords, Guardsmen, light-dragoons, and dandies of various calibres; but none of the ladies looked back at him after they had passed; none of the men hooked him familiarly by the arm, and turned him round to walk him fifty yards in the direction they were themselves going, for the mere pleasure of his society.

He saw Lady Featherbrain's bay horse stand with its head over the rails, at least a quarter of an hour, while its beautiful rider argued and gesticulated and talked with eyes, hands, shoulders, and *chignon*, at a dried-up, wizened, sunburned man, leaning on an umbrella to listen imperturbably while he smoked a cigar. When Burton passed, he took off his hat, as in duty bound, and her ladyship, who couldn't for the life of her help looking at every man as if she doted on him, smiled sweetly in return, but that was all. What was there in Jack Thoroughpin, thought the Dandy, thus to monopolise the prettiest woman in the Ride? He was anything but good-looking; he was past forty; he was ruined; but he remembered hearing one or two strange reckless escapades of which Jack had been the hero. It was quite true that he jumped into a lifeboat last winter, when none of the crew would volunteer; and though he had spent two fortunes, had they not both been sacrificed at the shrine of an unwise, unhappy, and impossible attachment? There was a vein of pure gold, no doubt, underlying the crust of worldliness round Jack Thoroughpin's heart; and Lady Featherbrain was woman enough to find it out.

So Burton walked on pondering, till a little farther up the Ride he met young Lord Glaramara, a man with whom, for many reasons, it would have suited him to have been on the most intimate terms. Glaramara's shooting in Westmorland, his stable at Melton, his drag in London, his cook, his cellar, his hospitality, were all irreproachable. He was buying yearlings, too, and seemed keen about racing, but as yet not a feather had been plucked from the pigeon's wing. A more eligible friend could not be conceived, and it was provoking that he should pass the Dandy with no warmer greeting than a careless nod, his whole attention engrossed by the man with whom he was walking arm-in-arm—a fat man, with a white hat, a red neckcloth, no gloves, and, yes,—he could not be mistaken,—a cotton umbrella! having, moreover, as he bitterly reflected, no earthly merit but that he once made a good speech in the House of Commons, and was the best

racket-player in England. It took more than one downward glance at his own faultless attire to restore the Dandy's equanimity after this last shock; nor was he yet in the best of tempers when he came face to face with his old companion, Dolly Egremont, leaning back against the rail, smoking in short nervous whiffs, while he glanced uncomfortably from side to side, with an anxiety and preoccupation quite foreign to his usual air of good-humoured content. This, you see, was Miss Tregunter's day for riding, at five o'clock, and Dolly was watching to see her pass. The vigil seemed in many respects to partake of the nature of a penance. People in love are sometimes very happy, I believe, but their normal state is, doubtless, one of considerable worry and restlessness, best described by the familiar expression, Fidget. He was glad, though, to meet the Dandy. These two had kept up their boyish friendship, and it is due to Burton to say that although he would not have hesitated at sacrificing Dolly to his own interest, he liked him better than any of the acquaintances he had made later in life. Mr. Egremont seemed not only more abstracted, but graver than usual.

"I am glad to find you here, Dandy," said he, removing the cigar from his mouth. "I wanted to talk to you about an old friend of ours. We must give him a lift between us. I'll do all I can. Have a weed?"

Burton accepted the proffered refreshment, lit his cigar, and nodded.

"It's about poor Jerry," continued Dolly, still glancing from side to side for the flutter of a certain blue habit on a chestnut horse, but warming to his subject nevertheless.

"What do you think? He's turned up. He's in London. I've seen him. You've no idea how he's altered. Poor Jerry! What a good-looking chap he used to be when we were at Archer's. Don't you remember Fanny What's-her-name?—the girl at the mill. Well, here he is, after knocking about all over the world. He hasn't a shilling. We must do something for him."

The Dandy had listened with as little expression of interest as if they had been talking about the weather, smoking placidly the while. He roused himself now to observe languidly—

"How? I don't see why—what do you propose to do?"

"We mustn't let him starve," replied Dolly indignantly. "I thought you and I between us might make some sort of provision for him in the meantime, till we can get him employment."

"As a crossing-sweeper, do you mean?" asked Burton. "I don't believe I've interest even for that. Go as low as you will, the supply seems greater than the demand."

> "Every door is barred with gold, and opens but to golden keys,
> Still, I don't despair. I'll think it over, if you please,"

replied Dolly musingly. "Well, you'll help him at anyrate, if you can."

To promise costs nothing, so Burton readily engaged himself thus far, and Dolly proceeded in more hopeful tones—

"I knew I could count upon his old friends. After all, people are much better than the world gives them credit for. I could tell you of one who has behaved like a trump, only I am not sure whether I ought, and perhaps she wouldn't like anybody to know."

Honest Dolly, admiring it extremely, was burning to trumpet forth Mrs. Vandeleur's generosity to the world in general.

"She!" answered Burton. "Ah! if it's a She have no scruples. Never keep faith with a woman, nor break it with a man. That's the fundamental principle that holds society together. I tell you, my dear fellow, they like being deceived. Hang me, if I don't think they like being shown up! At least, they always seem to do it for themselves if you're too cautious to do it for 'em. Out with it, Dolly; who's the Lady Bountiful?"

"I know you don't mean what you say, and I feel safe in telling you," answered Dolly, "because you are one of *us*. It's Mrs. Vandeleur, Dandy. That's the best woman in Europe!"

"There are not many to choose from," answered Burton in his most imperturbable tones, and keeping down with an effort the expression he feared would rise to his face, as of one who had just been dealt four-by-honours in his hand. "Let's take a turn amongst the carriages, Dolly. I can't see from here whether any of *our* admirers have arrived or not."

So speaking, he linked his arm in his friend's, and the two sauntered leisurely across the Ride towards a double line of carriages drawn up under the trees. Dolly was nothing loth. He had watched like a patient deer-stalker long enough in one place, and thought it time to change his post. Also, he was a little angry—men always are when disappointed—because chance had been against him to-day. With the noble sense of justice and logical sagacity peculiar to the position, he blamed Miss Tregunter severely for

missing him in a crowd of five hundred people, convinced that she could have changed her whole sentiments and forgotten him in the twelve hours that had elapsed since he saw her last.

So absorbed was Mr. Egremont in such uncomfortable reflections that he was nearly ridden over by the lady of his affections herself, who was looking for him, truth to tell, on the footway, and, quick-sighted as women generally are in such matters, failed to detect him immediately under her horse's nose. He thought she did it on purpose, and turned pale with vexation, leaving the Park forthwith, and excusing himself to his friend, by pleading the necessity of dressing for an early dinner. Burton, on the contrary, had observed the whole performance, puffing tranquilly at his cigar the while, and resolved to take advantage of this, as of all other chances in the game. Watching, therefore, the turn of the tide, he stopped Miss Tregunter as she drifted back, so to speak, with the ebb, walking her horse listlessly in the direction from which she had started, and wondering in her heart what had become of Dolly Egremont. You see, though these young people had made no actual assignation in so many words, there had been a sort of tacit agreement that they should meet at this hour in this place. Their attachment, too, had bloomed to that degree of maturity at which jealousy has already been kindled, while mutual confidence is not yet established; so, mistrusting each other considerably, they spent a good deal of time unpleasantly enough, attributing unworthy motives to the necessary and common-place doings of daily life.

Miss Tregunter, reining up the chestnut horse to converse with her professed admirer, Mr. Burton, felt sufficiently piqued at Dolly's fancied negligence to punish herself and him at one stroke; so she affected great pleasure in thus meeting the Dandy, and beamed down on him from her ascendency of fifteen hands and a half with a fascinating coquetry that, like the rest of her sex, she could put on as easily as a double lace veil. The Dandy accepted all such advances with laudable equanimity. He believed them only his due; but in the present instance he meant business, as he called it, and responded more warmly than usual. Straightening her horse's mane with a caressing hand, he looked up in her face, and regretted mournfully that "she had dropped her old friends, and he never saw her now."

"Whose fault is that?" replied the lady. "I suppose you don't expect me to drive down to White's and ask those

stupid waiters if Mr. Burton is in the club. Be quiet, Tomboy!"—for Tomboy, whisking his well-bred tail, was kicking sharply at a fly behind his girths.—"No, I'm like the fairy in the song, 'those that would see me must search for me well.'"

"I thought fairies were ugly old women on crutches," answered the Dandy. "You've not grown very ugly yet. Well, *qui cherche trouve*, I suppose. Shall you be in the Park to-morrow?"

"To-morrow?" repeated Miss Tregunter. "Certainly not—to-morrow's Sunday. I don't believe you can count the days of the week. But I shall ride on Monday at twelve; and as I know you can't get up till two, my movements need not affect you one way or the other."

So saying, Miss Tregunter cantered off, a little ashamed of herself, as well she might be, and wishing, before the chestnut was settled in his stride, that she had not allowed pique so to get the better of her as to make her disloyal, in word or manner, for one moment, to the man she loved. Burton looked after her, whistled softly, smiled, shook his head, put his cigar in his mouth again, and strolled on.

"I believe that would be my best game now," he said to himself. "She really *is* a catch; there's such a lot of ready money. I always thought she liked Dolly best till to-day. But there's no accounting for their fancies, and I might win on the post after all! And yet—and yet—if I could have the pick of the basket, and need only please myself, it's not you, with your red cheeks, Miss Janey, that I would choose."

I need hardly say the Dandy was not romantic, and a sentiment, so foreign to his practical nature, died out almost as soon as it arose, long before he could reach the vision from which it took its birth. That vision was but the glimpse of a pale proud face in a light transparent bonnet, looking like a pearl of great price among its surroundings, making them seem but mosaic and tawdry jewellery in comparison. A face such as passes before weary, wicked, world-worn men in their dreams, reminding them in its beauty of the purer, holier feelings their waking hours never know; of love, and hope, and trust, of the better part they put away in wilful blindness long ago, and can never share again.

It fleeted swiftly by, that winsome delicate face, in an open carriage with a pair of high-stepping horses, driven by a body-coachman, portly in girth and rubicund of aspect, well worthy of the name, to be drawn up in a shady spot

under the elms, whereto the Dandy picked his way jauntily, for whether she encouraged him or not, it was worth while to appear before the world on terms of easy intimacy with handsome Mrs. Vandeleur.

The White Rose could not be long in any one place on a sunny afternoon without finding herself surrounded by a swarm of summer-insects. Half a dozen of the best-dressed and best-looking young gentlemen in the Park were about her carriage when the Dandy arrived. It stung her to the quick to observe that they all made way for him, as if he, forsooth, had a better right than others to monopolise her society and engross her conversation; she bowed, therefore, with marked coldness, and turned her head to talk to a pretty boy, fresh from Eton, on the other side of the carriage. But the Dandy thought he had got more than one pull over her now, and determined she should feel it, so he laid his hand on her arm to arrest her attention; and, regardless of the angry gesture with which she shook it off, observed in a tone of confidential intimacy—

"I have just heard something that concerns us; I want to talk it over with you as soon as possible."

She turned a very haughty face upon him while she replied—

"More business, Mr. Burton? I should have thought you and I had bored one another enough for one day. I can answer for myself, at least!"

The listeners could not forbear smiling, and the late Etonian laughed outright. Two hours after he told his neighbour at the Blues' mess, how "It was a regular nose-ender for the Dandy, and he was glad of it!"

Burton lost his temper at once, and his vantage-ground with it.

"If you choose to trust me with your business matters, Mrs. Vandeleur," said he shortly, "I must talk them over with you. I have spent three mornings in the City on your affairs within the last fortnight, so, you see, the trouble is not all one way."

"Don't be afraid," she retorted scornfully, "you shall be paid your commission. Half a crown in the pound, I think, isn't it? Sir Henry, will you kindly tell my coachman to go home."

But before that thoroughly respectable servant could start his horses, Burton had recovered himself, and fired a parting shot.

"Don't think I mind the trouble," said he, calling up a

most affectionate expression of countenance, and leaning well into the carriage. "After all, we're partners, are we not? We must stand or fall together, and your interests are the same as mine!"

I am afraid Mrs. Vandeleur shed some bitter tears that evening before she went to dress for dinner. She had plenty of courage, the White Rose, and seldom gave way, but she longed for somebody to cherish and protect her now, somebody who would not have suffered her to be placed in such a false position, somebody whose voice used to be music, his glance sunshine, his presence safety. It was cruel, cruel to think she ought never to see him now!

CHAPTER XXXVII

SHINING RIVER

GERARD had been working hard for some weeks, so the play was nearly ready for rehearsal. He was very sick of it too, and began to think he owed himself a little relaxation. Money matters, also, were no longer so difficult a subject as formerly, thanks to the supplies received from an unknown source through Dolly Egremont. That gentleman, while professing, and indeed displaying, great interest in his former fellow-pupil, obstinately declined to furnish the slightest cue to the discovery of his benefactor, and Gerard, with an enforced philosophy, made up his mind he had better sit down contented to enjoy the goods the gods provided.

Dolly, too, had determined upon taking a day's pleasure over and above his ordinary allowance in the week. He was restless and preoccupied, therefore more prone than usual to excitement. A state of hot water was quite foreign to his easy-going habits, and made him uncomfortable; more, it made him unhappy.

Miss Tregunter seemed a puzzle that grew day by day more difficult to explain. Her honest admirer, unskilled in the ways of women, could not make head or tail of her behaviour. He remembered long ago how pleased she used to be when they met, how frank and cordial was her manner, how unrestrained her mirth. Now she never seemed to look him straight in the face. She avoided him in company, and appeared actually afraid to be left alone with him.

Afraid! And he would have laid down his life for her with pleasure on any doorstep in London! So he argued that she was tired of him, offended with him, hated him, and in this hasty conclusion, showed, I think, considerable ignorance of those intricate channels he had undertaken to navigate.

Now, Dolly, who apart from the influence of his lady-love was an open-hearted convivial fellow enough, had given an entertainment some few weeks before to the members of

his company at the Accordion — an entertainment which, beginning with a dinner and ending with a dance, had afforded unlimited satisfaction to those invited; but unfortunately some half-dozen of the corps had been prevented from attending, by a summons to assist at the private theatricals of a great lady twenty miles from London.

Miss Carmine, Mr. Belgrave, with certain other dramatic celebrities, had thus missed their share of the manager's hospitalities, and Dolly thought he could not do better than invite these absentees to a quiet little entertainment at Richmond, where they might enjoy sunshine, scenery, eating, drinking, smoking, boating, and flirting to their hearts' content. It was a good opportunity, he told Gerard, for the author to become acquainted with some of those talented individuals who were to clothe the sketches of his brain in living reality, and insisted on his being present.

Gerard Ainslie, after much debate in his own mind, had resolved to devote that particular day to another peep at Mrs. Vandeleur. He hungered, poor fellow, to see her again, nay, to feel the touch of her hand, to hear the sound of her voice once more, and he had hardened his heart to go and call upon her at her own house. For this purpose he dressed himself as well as his now replenished wardrobe would admit, and leaving the Richmond question open, proceeded early in the afternoon to knock at her door, devoutly hoping the summons might not be answered by his former acquaintance, Mr. Robert Smart. So far, fortune favoured him; the portly butler, who was on the eve of stepping round to his club, kindly informing him that Mrs. Vandeleur was not at home, and adding, in the plenitude of his good-humour, the further statement that she had gone down to Richmond, and wouldn't be back till the evening.

To Richmond! He hesitated no longer. Shutting his eyes to its obvious improbability, he even cherished a hope that he might find her one of the party he was about to join. For a moment life looked as bright as when he was nineteen, and in less than an hour he had torn off half his return-ticket, and was running like a boy up the wooden steps of Richmond Station. At the Castle he asked for Mr. Egremont's party, and was ushered on to the lawn, where he found a bevy of sauntering, over-dressed ladies waiting impatiently for dinner, but nothing like Norah's stately figure and pale beautiful face, look where he would. His heart turned sick, this rough, gold-digging adventurer, like some weak girl disappointed in her silly romantic dream. What a sham it all looked! Even the

golden sunshine and the sparkling river seemed to partake of the foil and tinsel and gaslight of the stage.

"We had almost given you up, Gerard," said Dolly's cheerful voice, as his host emerged on the lawn from one of the siderooms and took him kindly by the arm. "Dinner's just ready. This way, Mrs. Golightly. This way, Miss White. Belgrave, bring up the rest of the ladies. Ainslie, will you sit by Miss Carmine? Take the covers off, waiter—turtle—all right! Shut that door and put the lemon on the table. Mrs. Golightly, clear or thick? Have both!"

Gerard, recovering his equanimity, glanced round the table at his new friends. Miss Carmine, sitting next to him, was not half so pretty as he expected, and a good deal older than she looked on the stage. Lydia Goddard and Jessie White seemed merry, sparkling girls, with more than their share of comeliness; but Mrs. Golightly, who sat opposite, oppressed him from the first with sensations of astonishment and awe. Somebody must have told her she was like Mrs. Siddons, and her dignity of manner was, in consequence, crushing. The *mère noble*, as French people call it, was obviously her part, and very well she played it, even while eating whitebait at a Richmond dinner. Actors and actresses seem the only artists who are never ashamed of "talking shop." They glory in their profession, and why should they not? Miss Carmine, stealing a good look at Gerard, and approving of what she saw, soon embarked on the favourite subject.

"So you're writing us a play, Mr. Ainslie," said the accomplished actress, her features waking into beauty when she spoke. "You see, we know all about it. You men can't keep a secret, clever as you think yourselves."

"I'm only proud you should take an interest in it," answered Gerard courteously. "I wish I could write something more worthy of the acting."

Lydia Goddard looked up from a lobster *rissole*, and Jessie White desisted from her occupation of making faces at Mr. Belgrave. There was something in the tone of his voice that was sweet to a woman's ear, and they acknowledged the charm, just as Fanny Draper had acknowledged it to her ruin and his long ago. Even Mrs. Golightly bent her brows on him with qualified approval.

"It is a responsibility, young sir," said the stately lady. "I am glad you acknowledge its gravity. Our time and talents are too precious to be wasted on the vague wanderings of incompetency. Said I well, mine host?"

"Of course you did," answered Dolly, waking up from

a brown study, for he too felt the oppression of Mrs. Golightly.

> "Breathes there the man with soul so dead,
> That never to himself hath said,
> An actor's part becomes his bread?

I've seen a good deal of the manuscript, and like it. I can tell you, ladies and gentlemen, we haven't had such a thing out for years. Waiter—champagne!"

"You've written a very effective part for me, I'm told," said Miss Carmine aside, looking softly at her neighbour out of her eloquent eyes. "You don't know how grateful I am to people who take such pains on my behalf."

"I should think *you* could carry off the weakest style of writing," answered Gerard gallantly, feeling nevertheless a little out of his element,—"you need only come to the front and say 'Boh!' to him, to make a goose of the wisest of us."

"That's nonsense," observed Mrs. Golightly in imperial tones, but Miss Carmine would not hear her, and turned with a pleased face on the host.

"I like the idea of Violante immensely," said she, fixing Dolly in his turn with a charming smile. "It's exactly my style, you know; I quite long to begin studying it."

The manager fidgeted uneasily in his chair. He was in trouble already about this confounded drama, which he had accepted, after all, only to do Gerard a kindness. If the American actress came over, of course she would insist on playing Violante; then Miss Carmine would take huff, and there was sure to be a row! "It's not all beer and skittles managing a theatre," thought Dolly, but he held up his glass to be filled, and looked as pleasant as he could.

"You've got some nice words for poor me, haven't you, Mr. Ainslie?" said Jessie White, imploringly and coquettishly too, from the other end of the table.

"And I'm to be a page, in blue and white and spangles!" added Miss Goddard, clapping her hands with innocent glee, like a child of five-and-twenty, as she was. "Belgrave has been telling me all about it. Mind you give me plenty of business, there's a good fellow, and as close to the footlights as you can!"

"I've done my very best for both of you," answered Gerard, bowing over the glass in his hand, "and I can alter your parts till they fit you like your dresses," he added, congratulating himself that he had not written a word for either of them the while.

"Isn't he a duck?" whispered Jessie White to Miss

Goddard; and "Ain't you a goose?" answered the practical Lydia. "Why, Jessie, you little idiot, he's old enough to be your father!"

Mrs. Golightly cleared her voice portentously.

"I have yet to learn," said she, glaring at the hapless author, "how far Mr. Ainslie has sacrificed the interests of art to the paltry exigencies of our modern school; to what extent the dialogue, the situations, the characters, and the plot tend to develop our object in the abstract idea of tragedy. What, sir, do you conceive *is* our object in the abstract idea of tragedy?"

This was a poser for Gerard. Fortunately Mr. Barrington-Belgrave came to his rescue.

"There isn't a morsel of bad business in the whole of it," said he dogmatically; "everyone of us from first to last has enough to do and to spare. No claret, thank you, Mr. Egremont,—coffee?—if you please. Mrs. Golightly and ladies, may I ask your kind permission to indulge in a cigar?"

As soon as smoking began it was but natural that the little party should adjourn to the lawn, and break itself up into small knots of two and three. Jessie White and Lydia Goddard, after an ineffectual pounce at the author, contented themselves with Mr. Belgrave and a grave man, hitherto very silent, who was great in low comedy. Mrs. Golightly secured the manager, and Gerard Ainslie, as being in a certain sense the lion of the party, fell to the lot of Kate Carmine. She seemed pleased with the arrangement, conversing volubly and pleasantly enough, while they walked round and round the gravel-walk; her companion puffing thoughtfully at his cigar, and thinking how fragrant was the scent of the June roses, how fair the tinted glories of the evening sky—how calm and tranquil the broad river, glowing in a crimson flush of sunset; how full of tender memories, and vanished hopes, and longings for the impossible, that parting hour, which may well be called the sweet of the summer's day!

What a world it might have been! And here he was, after a noisy dinner, talking London scandal with an actress! She seemed to know everybody, and all about everything that was going on. She was amusing too, and related with considerable fun the last scrape into which Lady Featherbrain had inadvertently fallen, the domestic difference between the Ringdoves, and Mrs. Ringdove's unanswerable reasons for insisting on a separation, the late bill-discounting business brought to a climax by Hyacinth's winning the Ascot Cup,

with the names of half a dozen noblemen and gentlemen, extremely pleasant people, and particular friends of her own, who were likely to disappear in consequence.

A light breeze sighed through the elms on the other side of the river. Miss Carmine was seized with a romantic desire to make a little expedition on the water.

"Mr. Ainslie," she said in her most winning accents, "don't let us waste such a heavenly evening; the train is not till ten. Why shouldn't you pull—I mean scull—me about a little before we go back to London?"

"Willingly," answered Gerard, ready to go up in a balloon, or do anything anybody proposed, now that he had finished his cigar. "Down these steps, Miss Carmine. Take care of your dress in the mud—one foot on the thwarts—sit in the middle—that's it! Never mind the rudder; we don't want it, nor the waterman. Hand us that right-hand scull. That's a smart chap! Now shove off!"

Thus by an energetic push from a one-eyed boatman, the light skiff, with an end of Miss Carmine's scarf trailing over the side, was fairly launched on the bosom of the Thames.

"Am I quite safe?" smiled the actress, and it was marvellous how much of beauty she could call at will into her smile. "Can I trust myself with you, Mr. Ainslie, or shall we both come to grief?"

He answered with pardonable vanity, and perhaps more literally than she expected—

"I have pulled a whale-boat in the Pacific and paddled a canoe on Lake Huron. You needn't fear an upset, Miss Carmine. I could swim with you, I believe, from here to London Bridge if the tide served!"

"What a life yours must have been!" said the lady, appearing deeply interested; "so exciting, so romantic! I am so fond of adventurers and adventures! I wish you would tell me all yours."

"What, from the beginning?" answered Gerard, sculling lustily against stream. "You are prepared, then, to stay out all night? I've had a good many years of it. I'm an old man now."

"Old!" expostulated Miss Carmine. "Why, you're barely thirty"—reflecting that she herself was a good bit past that age. "No, just give me a rough sketch of your life. It amuses, it instructs me! When did you go abroad? What made you leave England? Was it—was it—disappointment?"

She looked down after she spoke, and watched the ripple

of the boat through the water. It was very prettily done—very prettily indeed. What Gerard might have replied we shall never learn, for a hoarse voice at the very nose of his boat shouted, not uncivilly, to know "where he was a-comin' to?" And a scull, shifted as quickly as his own, allowed another skiff to glide past them down-stream, with about eighteen inches interval. In that boat, pulled by an ancient mariner of Teddington, sat a lady and gentleman. The pale face of the former flashed upon Gerard Ainslie's eyes like a vision, for it was none other than Mrs. Vandeleur! Not altered—no, except that it seemed to him more beautiful than ever—not altered by a single line from the Norah Welby of Marston, from the ideal of womanly perfection and purity and grace that he had carried in his heart through all those years of toil, danger, sorrow, and privation. He had hoped to see her to-day—but not like this.

Had she recognised him? He could not tell. The boat sped so fast down-stream under the waterman's long, powerful strokes, and the twilight was already darkening into night. Nor had he identified her cavalier, who was stooping at the moment to arrange a cloak or cushion at her feet. The whole thing was so instantaneous that but for his companion's remark he might have been persuaded fancy had played him false.

"That's a *case*, I imagine," said Miss Carmine, not observing her oarsman's discomposure, or attributing it, perhaps, to the violent exercise. "They call her a beauty, too, still; but what they can see in her I can't for the life of me make out. She's much too tall, looks horrid disdainful, and as pale as a ghost."

"She? who?" asked Gerard, slackening his efforts, and preparing to put the boat about for a return.

"Why, Mrs. Vandeleur," answered his companion; "I thought you knew her by the way she stared. She'll know us again, at anyrate."

"And the gentleman?" asked Gerard in a choking voice, backing water vigorously with one scull the while.

"Oh! that was Burton," answered Miss Carmine; "Dandy Burton, they call him. I suppose they'll get married, those two; and I'm sure it's time they did. They've been talked about long enough."

It was indeed no other than Gerard's old fellow-pupil whom he thus met so unexpectedly with his unforgotten love. The White Rose had been persuaded to join Lady Billesdon's water-party that day at Richmond, and they had all gone up

the river in different four-oars, skiffs, and wherries, to visit the roaring cataract at Teddington Lock. Here, however, two young ladies, protesting they were bad sailors, insisted on returning by road; and the consequent change of arrangements compelled Mrs. Vandeleur, unless she wished to appear both rude and ridiculous, to make the homeward voyage with Mr. Burton. The two felt the calm of the summer evening, the influence of the quiet lovely scene. Her silence and abstraction did not escape the Dandy's notice, who flattered himself he had at last succeeded in making an impression, which he was careful not to disturb by loquacity or interruption. Neither of them, therefore, volunteered a remark on the boat they had so nearly run down, and they hardly exchanged a syllable till they reached the place of disembarkation, when they observed simultaneously that "it was a beautiful evening; they had spent a pleasant day; it was high time to order the carriages;" and so parted for the night.

Gerard, too, pulled his freight back to Richmond, sad and silent, as the "wordless man" who brought the Dead Lily of Astolat to the lordly towers of Arthur's royal palace. Miss Carmine could not make him out; but recollecting her own undoubted charms of person, manner, and conversation, accounted for his insensibility to all three by a fit of indigestion, the result of rowing too soon after dinner.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A REFUSAL

"DREAMS always go by contraries," yawned Miss Tregunter, waking from her morning slumber for the accustomed cup of tea to fortify her against the toil of dressing. "How I wish they didn't!" added this young lady, recalling with some difficulty the vision in which she had been steeped scarce five minutes ago.

She dreamt she was at a fancy ball in the character of Belinda, with high-heeled shoes, farthingale, patches, and an enormous superstructure of hairpins, hair-rolls, hair-powder, and pomatum. She knew she was looking her best, and was engaged to dance her first minuet with the Archbishop of Canterbury. It seemed the most natural thing in the world that this prelate, on coming to make his bow, should be dressed as an Indian brave — scalps, moccasins, war-paint, wampum, beads, and blanket, all complete; that, without resigning church preferment, or losing primitive freedom, he should carry her off, then and there, to his lodge in Kensington Gardens, where he bade her sit on a camp-stool and skin a dead buffalo, while he stepped down to Albert Gate for a look in at Tattersall's; that, having no instruments but a pair of nail scissors, she made a horrid mess of the buffalo, but skinned him at last, to find Dolly Egremont concealed beneath his hide; that Dolly then explained at great length his views on savage life in general, wound up by a declaration that he couldn't live another day without her, and while he pressed her for an answer to a very important question, raised her hand and was in the act of laying it to his lips, when— how provoking!—her maid came in with the tea, and she awoke.

What puppets we are! Even dreams affect us more than we would like to admit. Miss Tregunter thought of a good many things while she was dressing, on which she had never pondered so deeply before. In the first place, she allowed herself to wonder seriously why she had seen so little of Mr.

Egremont during the last few days, whether he had merely grown careless about her, or whether she could in any way have offended him. If so, whether such display of ill-humour was not the best possible sign, as denoting keen interest in herself? It was odd that she never suspected him of jealousy. Perhaps she felt so unconscious of having given him cause. Not for a moment did it occur to her that she had been more than commonly civil to Dandy Burton, and little did she imagine the hopes and schemes of which she was the object in that gentleman's designing brain. Miss Tregunter was a simple-minded person enough, and hardly aware of her own advantages as a pleasant, comely young woman, possessed of money in the funds. Although in truth one of the best "catches" of her year, she would have laughed in anybody's face who told her so; cherishing, indeed, with sufficient obstinacy, the romantic notions of a milkmaid on all matters connected with love and matrimony. If ever she was married, she had vowed at fifteen, it should be for herself, not reflecting, for young ladies are but shallow philosophers, how much of that very self consists in externals. Take away education, refinement, social position, all such advantages of Fortune's caprice, and, to use a hackneyed metaphor, you leave but the gem, uncut, unpolished, and without its setting—the intrinsic value is, perhaps, nearly the same; but instead of wearing it abroad you probably hide it carefully away, and leave it at home.

Miss Tregunter was a gem no doubt in her way, but ever since she could remember she had been brightened and worked up by the best jewellers. Deprived of both parents in childhood, she had been educated by an aunt, a Mrs. Maurice Tregunter, related to that deaf Lady Baker, in whom I fear it would be impossible to excite interest. With this aunt, or rather aunt by marriage, not a little to the advantage of that relative, the young heiress lived, in the country, but a few miles from Oakover, and went out in London.

The chaperon and her charge got on exceedingly well in both places, none the less, perhaps, that the young lady was passionately fond of riding, an exercise from which the elder was debarred by physical causes, the result of good living and content. It was the girl's favourite exercise, and nowhere more so than in London. She used to vow that late hours and hot rooms would be too much for her without the restorative of a fresh inspiriting canter before luncheon the following day. She was not believed, because of her rosy

cheeks; nevertheless, the horses came to the door as regularly as if her life depended on that remedy alone, and although she loved a ball dearly, none better, she often declared she would resign satin shoes willingly for life, rather than give up the side-saddle.

Jane Tregunter looked well on horseback; nobody better. She had a light, trim, wiry figure, especially adapted to those feats of skill which depend on balance. Her tapering limbs seemed firm and strong; while her hands and feet, though none of the smallest, were extremely well-shaped. In skating and dancing she was no mean proficient; could waltz figures of eight round two chairs, and do outside edges backwards, with the best performers; but never perhaps felt so completely in her element as when mounted on her chestnut horse, Tomboy, giving him what she called a spin.

Tomboy was usually in good wind—as well he might be—for his young mistress indulged him in these "spins," by which expression she understood a rousing gallop, without drawing bridle, from Apsley House to Kensington Gate, on every available opportunity, and as she rode four or five times a week, her horse was somewhat lighter in girth and fuller in muscle than most of the fellow-labourers that roused his emulation in the Park. Many an approving glance was cast after them by mounted dandies of every calibre as the pair swept by—the lengthy, well-bred chestnut, with his smooth elastic stride, harmonising so fairly in the real poetry of motion with the neat, small-waisted figure of his rider, in its blue habit, its perfectly fitting gloves, its glistening *chignon*, and provokingly saucy hat.

Admiring glances, though, were the utmost tribute any cavalier was permitted to offer—Lady Baker, when she took the responsibility of chaperoning Miss Tregunter in her aunt's absence, having made it a *sine quâ non* that the young lady should refuse all escort in these rides, save that of the venerable groom, who followed a hundred yards behind, and whose maxims, both of personal comfort and stable management, were considerably deranged by his young mistress's liberal notion of pace.

It may be that Dandy Burton was aware of this standing order when he resolved to march a-foot in his attack on the heiress, during the meeting which she had almost suggested, in the Park. He had been induced of late, partly in consequence of his money transactions with Mrs. Vandeleur, to look into his own affairs, and had found, like many of his companions, that his income, though a good one, was quite

And here she came, as usual at a gallop!

unequal to his expenditure. Of course he could see but one way out of the difficulty. He must marry an heiress—why not Miss Tregunter? There she was, an oldish young lady, still unappropriated, dividends and all! She had been out a good many years now; she must be waiting for somebody; probably for himself. The iron was never likely to be hotter than at present; he had better strike at once.

Now Mr. Burton, though like most Englishmen he was a rider, was not a horseman. The former merely suffers himself to be carried; the latter both gives and receives excitement, spirit, and energy from the exhilarating partnership of man and beast. He, whose home is in the saddle, feels equal to all emergencies when in his favourite position; his courage rises, his shyness vanishes, his self-reliance is redoubled, he feels twice the man, and he never looks to such advantage as on horseback; but the Dandy, though he had passed through his riding-school drill creditably enough, entertained more confidence in his own powers, moral and physical, when on foot, and would have felt extremely loth to hazard even a declaration of love, much more an offer of marriage, from the back of a light-hearted quadruped, whose ill-timed gambols might at any moment render the most important of questions abortive, the most favourable of answers inaudible.

Thus reflecting, and aware, moreover, that the lady might refuse him permission altogether to accompany her in a ride, the Dandy, dressed for walking with exceeding care, armed, moreover, with the thickest cigar and the thinnest umbrella fabricated in London, took up his post, about half-past twelve, opposite the nearest gate of Kensington Gardens, and waited, not very patiently, for the arrival of Miss Tregunter. Considering how little he cared for her, he was rather surprised to find how nervous he was. His mouth felt dry, though that might be the effect of his cigar, the worst, of course, in the whole batch; but why his hands should turn cold, and his face hot, he was at a loss to understand. He had proposed to three or four women before, and except in one instance, long ago, when he really cared, it was little more than asking them to dance. He must be getting shaky, he thought, losing his nerve, beginning to grow old! *Raison de plus*, by Jove! and here she came, as usual at a gallop!

It was a fiercer gallop than common. Tomboy knew as well as his mistress that she was put out, vexed, hurt, irritated, angry. Dolly Egremont had not been near her for three whole days, and Lady Baker, deaf as she was, had heard of his dining "with a lot of actresses, my dear, and

those sort of people, such a pity!" at Richmond. Janey was therefore at her worst. The frost is never so bitter as just before its break-up, and it needed no weather-wise prophet to foretell that her severity would ere long thaw, and dissolve itself in a flood of tears. Being piqued with one lover, she naturally returned the salutation of another with suspicious cordiality. Nay, reining up Tomboy, she sidled him, snorting and glowing all over, close to the footpath; shaking hands with Burton across the rail, and observing meaningly, that "he must have a good memory, and she hoped his early rising wouldn't do him any harm!" Thus encouraged, the Dandy made his plunge.

"Miss Tregunter," said he, looking imploringly up in her face, and then glancing at the groom, to make sure he was out of hearing. "You're always laughing at a fellow—will you promise not to laugh at me if I tell you something? I'm in earnest. Upon my soul I am!"

"Ain't I as grave as a judge?" she replied comically, but her heart beat faster, and she didn't quite like it.

"You won't believe me," he continued, speaking very quick, and scanning the Ride anxiously each way, in fear of interruption. "I'm not the sort of man you think. I—I'm a domestic fellow in reality. I was happy enough till I began to—to like you so much. Now I'm so bored if I don't see you, I'm perfectly miserable. I've been watching for you here, at least an hour" (he dashed away the cigar not half smoked out, that he had lighted when he took up his station there); "will you—won't you give me a right to wait for you, and ride with you, and walk with you, and take you about with me everywhere as my wife?"

Then he wished he had not thrown his cigar away, there was such an awkward pause while she looked straight between her horse's ears.

For one moment she wavered. He was handsome, he was well known, he had a certain spurious reputation, and it would make Dolly so miserable! This last consideration brought with it the necessary reaction. All her better nature rose in appeal against such an act of rebellion, and Jane Tregunter never seemed so lovely nor so womanly as, while looking frankly down, straight into the Dandy's eyes, she laid her hand in his, and said gently but decidedly, "You pay me a higher compliment, Mr. Burton, than I deserve; nay, than I desire. Many other women would make you far happier than I should. Believe me, I am proud of your admiration, and I value your friendship. I shall not lose it,

"She sidled him, snorting and glowing all over."

shall I, because I am honest and straightforward in saying No?"

Then she bowed her head, tightened her veil, put Tomboy into a gallop, and never stopped till she reached her own door, where, dismissing him with a kiss in the very middle of his nose, she ran upstairs, locked herself into her own room, and reappeared at luncheon, considerably refreshed by "a good cry," and a dose of sal volatile and red lavender.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A REBUFF

MEN have no efficient substitute for either of the above restoratives. Instead of crying, they swear, instead of taking tonics, they consume tobacco, sometimes brandy and water, feeling the while what they themselves call "a facer," none the less that they affect to make light of, and carry it off with bravado. The Dandy's heart was perhaps unwounded by Miss Tregunter's refusal, but his self-interest sustained a crushing blow, and harder yet to bear, his self-esteem was stricken to the dust. So he walked on aimlessly, through that wilderness which stretches its expanse in front of Knightsbridge Barracks, almost wishing that he was a jolly subaltern once more, with no heavier cares in life than the steadiness of his troop, the fit of his jack-boots, and the length of his charger's tail. He reflected, as we all of us do now and then when things go wrong, how he had wasted time, and energy, and opportunities in the pursuit of—what? When he came to think about it, he could not say that he had been positively pursuing anything except discomfiture. And he had overtaken his quarry to-day, no doubt. He had been unscrupulous, perhaps, but still he owned a conscience, such as it was. Not good enough for happiness, not wicked enough for pleasure, he felt he had botched the whole business from beginning to end, and resolved henceforth to turn over a new leaf, and—but what would the world say? That he had been refused by Miss Tregunter, and was an altered man in consequence. Here he cursed an innocent little girl who crossed his path trundling her innocent little hoop; and having thus relieved his temper, felt more like himself again. No! The world (*his* world, a miserable little *coterie* of five hundred people) should not pity him. He would show them (and much they would care) that he rose the stronger for a fall, the bolder for defeat. Such a repulse as had just checked him could only be covered by an audacious attack, a startling victory! Then he thought what

a fool he had been thus to put himself in Miss Tregunter's power. Could he depend upon her silence? He believed not. At anyrate, it was against all his maxims to trust a woman to hold her tongue. She wasn't half a bad girl after all; beyond a feeling of soreness, he bore her no grudge for her refusal, though he pitied her bad taste; but to suppose that she would abstain from sticking into her cap such a feather as the conquest of Dandy Burton was simply absurd. She would tell her intimate friends. Mrs. Vandeleur, of course. And now something really stung him to the quick, while he thought how soon this last piece of tomfoolery would come to the knowledge of the White Rose. She had been cooler than usual to him of late, she had even snubbed him very decidedly in public, and he fancied he could detect in her manner an impatience of his friendly professions, of the obligations under which he had placed her, and of the terms on which they stood. Women often married fellows, he argued, for no better reason than to get out of an anomalous position. There was nobody else in the field, that he knew of. Stay! There was a mysterious rival somewhere, but the world could only shrug its bare worldly shoulders, and nod, and whisper, without being able to point out the man. "It was strange," said the world behind its fan, "that such a woman as that, so handsome, so high-spirited, so independent, should have no acknowledged lover in society; less strange, perhaps, you will say, my dear, when I assure you that I know from the best authority she does disappear once or twice a week, and nobody can tell what becomes of her. She is always back to dinner, that I can prove, because mine is half-sister to dear Lady Tattle's maid, who was with Mrs. Vandeleur all last season. Depend upon it, there's something queer about her. She don't dye her hair, she wears her own teeth, and as for Madame Rachel, I know it's not that, because I— Well, never mind why, but I know it isn't. Of course, it's very foolish, and the way to get herself talked about. Such a pity, dear, isn't it?"

All this, thought Burton, was so much in favour of any well-bred, well-known man, who should offer to make her his wife in a plain, sensible way, apart from everything like sentiment or romance. If her position was insecure, it would be fortified by a husband, and what a pleasant house might be kept, what charming little dinners might be given, by such a man as himself, for instance, and such a woman as the White Rose! What an idiot he had been to make Jane Tregunter an offer, when, perhaps, he might marry Mrs.

Vandeleur out-of-hand. By the time he reached Albert Gate he began to think he was very much in love with her.

The Dandy's, however, was no unreasoning or uncalculating affection. He added to the lady's personal charms many more lasting advantages, such as jointure, private fortune, position, and acquaintances. Ere he was well out of the Park, he said to himself he had got a strong pull over her, and he would be an ass not to use it. While he turned the corner of the street she lived in, he resolved to run his chance then and there; by the time he reached her door he assured himself, though not very heartily, that the fight was as good as over, and he must gain the victory. She could not be out, for there was her brougham, with its handsome brown horse, in waiting, so he tore a leaf off his betting-book and sent up a line, as follows:—

"DEAR MRS. V.,—May I see you for one moment—not on business? Please say Yes!"

In two minutes he was following Robert Smart up the well-known staircase, feeling a little nervous, but pluming himself notwithstanding on his spirit of adventure in thus proposing to two women the same morning, before he sat down to luncheon. Ushered into the familiar drawing-room, he found Mrs. Vandeleur at the writing-table with her bonnet on, ready dressed to go out. She finished her note hastily, dashing off the signature with a scrawl, shook hands with him, and said, as composedly as if he had been her grandfather—

"What can I do for you, Mr. Burton? I am afraid luncheon is quite cold."

It was a bad beginning. His *savoir faire* told him that for such a purpose as he had in view the gentleman could not be too calm and collected with plenty of leisure before him; the lady, however flurried, should by no means be in haste. He knew he had better back out and put it off, but, goaded by the reflection that his late defeat would become public property long before dinner-time, he advanced with the courage of despair.

"You can give me five minutes," he replied, "I will try not to detain you longer."

"Speak up," she answered, with a laugh, seating herself a long way off.

He was standing on the hearth-rug, smoothing the glossy surface of his hat. Like every other man under similar

circumstances, this employment afforded him a certain confidence. Deprived of the instrument, he would have been utterly and idiotically helpless.

"Mrs. Vandeleur," he began, "I have had the pleasure of knowing you a long time. Our interests have lately become identical."

The proud look was gathering on her face, crossed with a shade of scorn.

"Mr. Burton," she replied, "I deny the position."

"Well," he retorted, a little nettled, "the world, at least, is good enough to think so. I have proved my friendship—more, my devotion—in the only way the nineteenth century permits. Formerly a man got his head broken for the sake of the lady he admired. To-day he goes into the City and sees her lawyer for her. You have difficulties. Let them become mine. People talk about us. Give them a reason for talking. They have joined our names together. Let us join them ourselves for good and all."

No amount of anger or vexation could have been so discomfiting as the blank bewilderment on Mrs. Vandeleur's haughty face.

"Mr. Burton!" said she. "Are you in your senses?"

"Perfectly," he replied, growing red with wrath. "And if you were too, you could hardly hesitate in accepting an offer so obviously to your advantage."

She rose from her chair with the port of an empress, and every syllable she uttered in her clear, cold voice cut sharp and true, like a knife.

"Mr. Burton, I thank you for teaching me a lesson I ought perhaps to have learnt long ago. I now see that a woman in my position cannot have a *man*-friend without subjecting herself to misconstruction and insult. Yes, insult; for I consider your suggestion, made in such a way, neither more nor less. Not another day will I remain under the slightest obligation to you,—not an hour, if I can help it! What you propose is impossible, and I regret it—you needn't look pleased—I regret it for this reason, that, were it possible, I might better make you understand the scorn and loathing with which I reject your offer, and which I hope it is not unladylike in me to express. When we meet in society, it will be as the merest acquaintance. You startled me at first, but I will not pay you the compliment of saying I am surprised. Good-morning, Mr. Burton; I need not detain you another moment."

Thus speaking, she swept out of the room with one of

those bows which, for courtesy of dismissal, is about equivalent to a slap in the face.

He had caught an outward polish from the society in which he lived, and held the door open for her to pass, but he was not a gentleman all through, and cursed her bitterly as he stepped downstairs, muttering between his teeth that "he would be even with her before all was done!" He never knew exactly how he got into the street, but, when there, observed the brougham had not left the door. A bright thought struck him, which was less, perhaps, an inspiration of the moment than the result of many previous suspicions brought to a head, as it were, by spite. Collecting all his energies, he resolved to act on it forthwith.

CHAPTER XL

THE REASON WHY

"IT'S to be war to the knife, is it?" said the Dandy to the nearest lamppost. "All right; I am agreeable, my lady, and I advise you to look out!"

Then he thought of the one suspicion about Mrs. Vandeleur, the one speck that tarnished the petals of the White Rose. If he could make himself master of this secret, unmask the intrigue that he never doubted it involved, and identify the lover for whose sake she ran so great a risk, he would be able to dictate his own terms. After all, you see, the Dandy was not the least a gentleman in the real acceptation of the word, though he was received as such by society; but he had plenty of cunning, a fair share of tact, and many of the less estimable qualities which go to form a shrewd man of the world. "Never make a rush at your adversary after receiving a severe blow," say the mentors of the prize-ring. "Keep out of distance, shake your head a little, and collect yourself, before you go in again."

Dandy Burton, sore and quivering from the punishment he had sustained, acted on this wholesome advice, smoothed his ruffled feathers, and began to think. He looked at his watch; it was but little after two o'clock. Mrs. Vandeleur must have ordered luncheon at least an hour sooner than usual. He knew the ways of the house and the habits of its mistress. He was aware she would not go shopping so early. There was a great breakfast to-day at the Cowslips, but he had heard her say she should send an excuse. All London would be there, and Mrs. Vandeleur seldom refused anything of Lady Syllabub's. There must be some reason for this unusual seclusion. Perhaps it was her day for the mysterious expedition?—the day of all others she had better have kept friends with him. Now was the time to follow and find her out. Two doors off stood a four-wheeled cab, just dismissed. The driver, having only received his proper fare, was crawling sulkily off at a walk. Burton hailed him, and jumped in.

"Is your horse pretty fresh?" said he, showing a half-crown in his fingers.

Fresh! Of course he was as fresh as paint. Who ever heard of a cab-horse being tired when the fare looked like a shilling a mile?

"Then drive to the other end of the street," continued the Dandy. "Watch that brougham with a brown horse. He can trot, mind you, and you must put on the steam. Don't lose sight of it for a moment. Follow within twenty yards wherever it goes."

Then he pulled both windows up, and waited—waited—patiently enough, with his eye on the dark-coloured brougham.

What is it they do? Mrs. Vandeleur had been ready dressed from top to toe when he entered her house a quarter of an hour ago, yet it was at least another quarter of an hour before she emerged. The brown horse, however, made up for lost time, starting off, directly he heard the carriage-door bang, at a good twelve miles an hour. Could she be going shopping after all? The brougham was pulled up at a stupendous establishment for the promotion of feminine extravagance, and its occupant went in looking extremely like a purchaser; but at the door she spoke to her footman, who touched his hat, mounted the box from which he had lately descended, and was driven slowly away.

"Carriage ordered home," thought Burton; "don't want the servants to talk. Scent improves every yard. There's no bolt-hole to this place, for I've been in it a hundred times. She must come out again the same way. Patience, my boy—we shall be even with her yet."

He had not long to wait. She soon re-appeared with an extra veil on, and a small paper parcel in her hand. Hailing a passing cab, and sadly soiling her dress against the wheel getting in, she was off again; but he had no fear now of her escaping him. His driver, too, entered thoroughly into the spirit of the chase, well aware that such jobs as these afforded a lucrative day's work. What a wearisome business it was, jingling at the rate of six miles an hour through those interminable streets that lead to the suburbs of London on the Kensington side. The Dandy hated discomfort, and no vehicle but a Wallachian waggon could have been less adapted to commodious transit than that in which he found himself. The seat was high and sloping; the roof jammed a new hat down on his eyebrows; the cushions, of a faded plush, felt damp and slippery; the windows rattled in their frames; the whole interior smelt of mould, old clothes, and

wet straw. He would have abandoned the pursuit more than once, but that the spirit of spite, vengeance, and wounded self-love kept him up. As he rumbled on, his suspicions and anticipations of a crowning triumph increased more and more. The length of the journey, the distance from her own home—all these precautions argued something of a nature which the world would condemn as very disgraceful if found out. What a bright idea his had been thus to constitute himself a spy on her actions, and attain the power of showing her up! He exulted, this man, in the probable degradation of the woman he had implored an hour ago to be his wife, and there was nobody to kick him—more's the pity.

The turns became shorter, the houses less imposing. Passing new streets and plots of ground "To Let on Building Lease," they soon reached real standard trees and leafy hedges. Burton's driver was already revolving in his mind the remunerative nature of the job, calculating how high a sum he might venture to charge for "back fare," when the cab he followed stopped with a jerk at a green door, let into a garden wall surrounding a house of which the roof and chimneys could alone be seen from outside.

Burton squeezed himself into a corner of his hiding-place, and watched Mrs. Vandeleur dismiss her cab. There seemed no hesitation about the fare, and she tendered it with an air of decision that denoted she was here not for the first nor second time. The Dandy's exultation was only damped by certain misgivings as to his own position if he ventured farther, supposing there was a lover in the case, supposing that lover should be irascible, prone to personal collision and disposed to resent a liberty with blows. There was no time, however, for hesitation, and he possessed, at least, that mere physical indifference to a wrangle which depends chiefly on digestion. He was out of his cab the instant Mrs. Vandeleur passed through the green door.

Either by accident or design she left it ajar, and he followed so close on her track as to catch a glimpse of her dress while she turned an angle of the shrubbery in which he found himself. It was one of those snug secluded retreats to be rented by scores within an hour's drive of London in any direction, and which convey as perfect an idea of privacy and retirement as the most remote manor-house in Cumberland or Cornwall. Through a vista in the shrubbery, rich with its fragrance of lilacs and syringa, gleaming with Portugal laurels and gilded with drooping laburnums, the intruder caught a glimpse of a long low white building, surrounded by a

verandah, defended with creepers, sunshades, Venetian blinds, and other contrivances of a stifling nature to keep out the heat.

He followed up the chase by a winding path through the densest of this suburban thicket, to emerge on a trim, well-kept lawn, studded with a few stone vases, and overshadowed by a gigantic elm, girdled with a circular wooden seat. Under the shade of this fine old tree a garden-chair had been wheeled, but Mrs. Vandeleur's undulating figure, as she crossed the lawn, hid its occupant from the spy's observation, although for a moment he fancied he could detect the silvery hair of an old man's head reclining against the cushions. He had no time, however, to speculate. The White Rose, who had ignored him patiently till he was too far advanced for retreat, turned fiercely on him now, and the Dandy never felt so small as while he stood there in the summer sunshine, thoroughly ashamed of himself, quivering like a beaten hound, and shrinking from the insupportable scorn of those merciless eyes.

She spoke low, as people often do when they mean what they say, but her whole figure seemed to dilate and grow taller in its concentration of disgust and defiance ; nor will I take upon me to affirm that, through all Mr. Burton's discomfiture, there did not lurk a faint glimmer of consolation to think he had escaped such a Tartar for a wife.

"I congratulate you," she said ; "I make you my compliments on the high chivalrous spirit you have displayed to-day, and your gentlemanlike conduct throughout. Do you think I am an idiot, Mr. Burton? Do you flatter yourself I have not seen through you? I knew you were following me here from the moment I left 'Barége and Tulles' in the cab ; I determined to give you a lesson, and now you have it! This, sir, is the intrigue I carried on for years. Here is the lover I come to see. Ah! look at him, and thank your stars that he is no longer the Vandeleur you remember in the pride and strength of manhood. (Hush! hush! hush!)" and she laid her hand caressingly on the brows of the feeble drivelling idiot, whose eye was beginning to brighten, and his pulses to stir with the only sensation he had left, that of jealousy at the presence of anyone with his wife. Her glance was soft and tender while she soothed her husband, but it gleamed like steel when it turned again on the unhappy Dandy. "Yes," she continued, "you may thank your stars, I say ; for, by Heaven! if this was the man of a dozen years ago, he would have kicked you from here back to London, every step of the way! Now go!"

And Dandy Burton went sneaking through the shrubbery and the garden-door, like a detected pickpocket, glad to find the miserable cab that brought him still in waiting, thankful to hide his head in that mouldy refuge, rejoicing to hurry back and lose himself amongst a myriad of fellow-reptiles in town.

But the day's excitement and the day's anxiety were not yet over for Mrs. Vandeleur. The ruling passion that had destroyed her husband's intellect, already sapped by excess and self-indulgence, thus excited by the intruder's presence, blazed into the first lucid interval he had known since his fatal injuries. The poor idiot seemed to awake from some long, deep, dreamless slumber, and reason returned for the space of a few hours, during which he recognised Norah, conversed with her, and called her by name. She had nursed him, tended him, looked after him for years, yet never before, since his accident, had he even looked as if he knew she was there. But it was the parting gleam of sunset on a rainy evening, the flash of the candle expiring in its socket.

By ten o'clock that night John Vandeleur was lying dead in the secluded retreat, which had been to him a living tomb from the day he was brought into it, crushed, mangled, and insane, after his ghastly leap into the courtyard of the Hotel at Heidelberg.

CHAPTER XLI

WITHOUT

IT was early spring in London, so early that the east winds had not thoroughly set in, and the mild genial weather gladdened the very vegetables in the areas, and the crossing-sweepers, who had plenty to do after the thaw, in the streets. It was to be an early season too, so people said; and though squares and crescents had not yet put on their tender green dresses that wear so badly through summer dust and smoke—though asparagus had not appeared in the market, and lamb was still thirteen-pence a pound—knockers began to thunder, carriages to roll, cards to pour in, and the business of life seemed about to commence, for young ladies of the upper class, from seventeen to seven-and-twenty, waking out of winter lethargy into the delightful hurry and excitement of the season.

A good many people were already in town. Mrs. Vandeleur had left off her widow's cap and reduced the depth of her crape borders. Dolly Egremont, after a grand quarrel with Miss Tregunter, who had spent several months in the South of France, and never shown since, was up to his ears in theatrical affairs. His correspondence with the American actress alone, who, always coming, had not yet arrived, would have kept one secretary in full employment; and while he was good-humoured and friendly as ever, he looked (for him) harassed and worn with too much to do, something on his mind, and not a single moment to spare.

Dandy Burton was going about as usual; had left cards on the White Rose more than once—nay, had even shaken hands when he met her by accident in the street, though against her will. And Gerard Ainslie, with capital lodgings in Jermyn Street, was ordering carriages, buying hacks, giving dinner-parties, and making acquaintances with the

greatest rapidity, for he had come into some six or seven thousand a year.

Yes, the wheel had turned at last. His great-uncle was dead, not having thoroughly forgiven him, and, indeed, having made several wills, in which all he possessed was left away from his nearest relation. When an elderly gentleman marries his housekeeper, it is to be supposed that he takes so decided a step from personal knowledge of her character and long familiarity with her good qualities. He does not always find, however, that she makes him as good a wife as she did a servant, and disappointment under such circumstances at the failure of an article is generally proportioned to the price paid for it. In the present instance hatred and disgust soon replaced whatever sentiments of affection or esteem had induced the old man to commit such an absurdity; and nobody but his lawyer would have had patience with the childish irritation that caused him day after day to dictate and destroy different testamentary dispositions of his handsome property. At last, in a fit of unreasonable anger against his wife, he left everything to his great-nephew, and died the following morning in a fit of apoplexy.

Gerard Ainslie now found himself extricated, if not from penury, at least from very narrow circumstances, and raised to considerable wealth. The change arriving in the full flush and prime of manhood, was like a new life. A very young man coming into possession of a large fortune, hardly appreciates either the advantages he has gained or the inconveniences from which he has escaped. Later, when the bloom is off the flower once for all, nothing can excite him to great exultation, and he has probably learned the inevitable lesson of experience, that happiness, never found when sought, is independent of externals, and springs exclusively from within. But for one who has been through the privations and annoyances of poverty while at an age to feel their edge most keenly, to emerge from them at a time of life when hope has not yet sunk below the horizon, when the sap is still rising in the tree, such a transformation of self and surroundings is light after darkness, winter after summer, health after sickness, freedom after captivity, pleasure after pain.

No man in London was better qualified than Gerard Ainslie to appreciate such an alteration in his fortunes. Brought up with the tastes and habits of an English gentleman, he united the love of luxury and refinement with the delight in rough athletic exercises peculiar to his class. This combination can hardly be considered economical; and a

man who wants to tire three horses in a day, risking neck and limbs over High Leicestershire, ere he returns to a dinner-party, music, and the society of half a dozen charming women at night, should have a purse as deep as his desire for pleasure is inexhaustible, should be placed by Fortune in a position that admits of his wasting time, energy, health, and capital in the pursuit of mere amusement. Gerard, as we know, had been what is called a good fellow all his life. A *bon camarade* at the diggings, a jovial companion at a mess-table or in a club, with men he was sure to be popular, from his frank, pleasant temper, his high spirit, and something womanly at his heart. The ladies had made a favourite of him from boyhood. To their deeper perceptions there had always been something fascinating about his eyes and smile. They liked him none the worse now that his whiskers were grown, and he had the reputation of being a traveller, an adventurer, a man with a history, above all a capital *parti*.

So, in a few weeks, he was asked to a great variety of places, saddled with a vast number of engagements, any of which (and this made him none the less popular) he was ready to throw over at a moment's notice, and altogether launched on the world of London with a fair wind and a flowing tide.

We all know the story of the princess and her rumpled rose-leaf felt through half a score of blankets. Gerard also had a leaf or two that worried him in the bed of roses to which he had lately climbed. In the first place, his play had not yet been acted, although, as may be easily imagined, his accession to wealth had in no way detracted from the merits of a piece which Dolly's friendship had accepted when the author was poor. Still, he was eager to behold it on the stage; and in the short period during which necessity compelled him to wield the pen he had contracted a jealous anxiety for publicity, an insatiable desire for fame, such as poisons the content of most inexperienced authors, dramatic and otherwise.

Pope Clement; or, the Cardinal's Collapse, had not yet been put in rehearsal. Everything depended on the American actress, and the American actress depended on a New York public and the Sou'-westers of the Atlantic. Till she arrived he could not answer the questions showered on him by every acquaintance in the street, "When is your play coming out?" —this was rose-leaf number one.

Rose-leaf number two gave him a good deal more uneasiness. He was in a continual fidget about Mrs. Vandeleur.

The notice of her husband's death in the *Times* did not indeed, surprise him as much as the rest of the London world, who had chosen to consider her a widow for some years, but it had opened up a range of speculation that all the duties and pleasures of his new position seemed unable to drive out of his head. She had but lately returned to town; he knew that, for in the set amongst whom he now lived it was no longer necessary to tamper with servants for information of her movements. She had been down to Oakover. He wondered whether she visited her father's parsonage, the road across the marshes, the old haunts that were in his memory still like holy ground, and whether she thought of him? He could bear it no longer: see her he must; and all unconscious of the genial spring weather, he started nervously on foot for her residence, dreading mainly his recognition by Robert Smart, and the contingency of her not being at home.

In spite of his agitation, he could not forbear smiling as he walked along, and remembered how different had been his passage through the streets of London a few short months ago, when every day's dinner was uncertain, and he could not even afford decent clothes to his back. Now the very crossing-sweepers, who tripped him up, called him "my lord." Hansom cabdrivers, eyeing him respectfully from their perches, shot imploring glances to take him in. Taper fingers were kissed and pretty heads bowed at him from well-appointed carriages, while dandies, for whom nothing on earth seemed good enough, stopped to clap him familiarly on the shoulder and take him by the hand. It was pleasant, it was exhilarating; but he had been a gold-digger; he had been a settler; he had served one voyage, when at his worst, before the mast,—and it did not turn his head the least. Jack, who shared his last quid with him that night in the whaleboat, was perhaps quite as good a fellow as Lord Frederick; Tom, who nursed him through low fever in the swamps, had a pleasanter way with him than Sir Harry, and looked indeed a good deal more like a gentleman. Nay, something happened at Hyde Park Corner that could scarcely have taken place in San Francisco or Ballarat.

Two remarkably well-dressed young men, walking arm-in-arm, stopped short ten paces off, and crossed Piccadilly at the muddiest part, as if to avoid a meeting. He recognised them both. One, indeed, had the grace to blush deeply while he picked his way through the dirt, and his letter Gerard could feel at that moment in his own breast-pocket, requesting the loan of a large sum of money; but the other only laughed

and with reason, for he had borrowed a couple of hundred the week before from the man he seemed so anxious to avoid, and the joke was probably enhanced by the small probability of his ever being able to pay!

Gerard felt so hurt, the tears almost rose to his eyes. "Hang it!" he muttered, "I can't be such a bad fellow as they take me for; and I thought they were friends—real friends I could depend upon. I've met some staunch ones in my life, but I wonder how many I've got left!"

It set him thinking; the behaviour of these young gentlemen puzzled him. He did not see that they were merely acting up to a wholesome rule for the enjoyment of life, which forbids people, under any circumstances, to run the slightest risk of being bored. They felt, doubtless with some tact, that there would be a certain amount of *gène* about a meeting, till the one's loan and the other's letter had been forgotten. So they simply avoided it. Perhaps they were right; but Gerard had worn a red shirt and carried a pickaxe too lately to see the matter in that light, and he turned down Grosvenor Place, reflecting with some bitterness that there was but one good fellow in the whole of London, and his name was Dolly Egremont. A block of carriages in Halkin Street, checking the stream of foot-passengers, brought him on to that gentleman's very shoulders. The two naturally hooked arms, and walked forward together. Gerard's heart was full. He pressed his friend's elbow to his side.

"Old fellow," said he, "don't think me a beast! I'm not really ungrateful. I've never half thanked you for the hand you gave me when I was so deep in the hole—I've never had a chance."

"Nonsense!" answered Dolly, with an Englishman's insurmountable repugnance to all expression of sentiment, "you would have done just the same for me! But it's all right now, isn't it?"

"Right!" replied the other. "I'm in clover, my dear fellow. I positively roll in riches. Look here, I never can repay your kindness and consideration; but with regard to the money, that kept me from starving, you know. By Jove —literally from starving! It's nothing to me now, but it was everything then, and altogether it amounts to a goodish sum, and it must have inconvenienced you with that theatre on your hands, and—in short"—

Gerard was getting confused, and could not put into proper language what he wanted to say. His friend turned round on him and stood still.

"I've never told you," said he—"I never knew whether I might—Jerry, you ought to know—the money didn't come from me; at least, very little of it; there was another party in the case, a party you'd hardly guess, who 'parted' freely, like a brick!"

"Not Burton!" exclaimed Gerard in an accent of considerable alarm.

"No, not Burton!" repeated the other. "Quite the reverse, I may say. What do you think of the White Rose, my boy? It was, I give you my honour! Every shilling I forwarded you in those three different drafts came from Mrs. Vandeleur."

Gerard Ainslie started as if he had been shot.

"Mrs. Vandeleur!" was all he could gasp. "I was going to call there now."

"You'll find her at home," answered the other, looking at his watch. "She never drives till four o'clock. Good-bye, Jerry; it's time I was at the Accordion."

And Dolly, hailing a passing hansom, was carried off forthwith, leaving his friend at Mrs. Vandeleur's door in a whirl of conflicting feelings, amongst which a sense of unspeakable happiness predominated. If nervous before, judge what he was now! He never knew how he rang the bell, who opened the door, by what process he got upstairs, or whether he entered Mrs. Vandeleur's drawing-room on his head or his heels!

CHAPTER XLII

WITHIN

SHE had been thinking of him all the morning. Sitting with her feet on the fender, and her work in her lap, she was thinking of him even then. She had come to London earlier than she intended, earlier, indeed, than Lady Baker and other counsellors, strict guardians of the *convenances*, had advised, in the hope that on that restless, shifting, ever-varying sea, they might, after all those years of separation, be drifted together once more.

The night her husband died had afforded Norah one of those glimpses into reality that sometimes reveal to us the misapprehensions and misconceptions under which we too often shape our conduct. It was the sudden clearing off, so to speak, of a fog in which she had been wandering with false impressions of latitude, longitude, locality, and general bearings.

Roused to a temporary consciousness by Burton's unjustifiable intrusion, Vandeleur had taken advantage of his restored faculties to make his wife the only amends left before reaction came on and the lamp of life was extinguished for ever. Holding her hand, looking into her face, with the bright, still cunning eyes that never formerly, even in his best days, could thus meet her own, he confessed the treachery he had practised towards herself and the inexperienced boy, whom he knew she had loved from the first. He detailed, with something of the old graceful flattery, so touching in this helpless, dying invalid, the effect of her charms on his worn, world-wearied heart. He had loved her in his selfish way as well, he told her, as it was in his nature to love anything but his own desires, and this very affection had wrought out his punishment. He saw it all now, but too late. Of course too late! Every fool could tell how the game should have been played after the tricks were turned. He knew he had no chance so long as Gerard Ainslie remained his rival; and was he, the finished practised *roué*, to be beaten in a race for such

a prize by a raw lad of nineteen? Not if he knew it. All was fair in love and war. Norah remembered Fanny Draper, didn't she? Pretty, good-for-nothing, black-eyed girl at the mill? Well, he had bribed Miss Fanny to make up to the young gentleman on her own account, to follow him about, report his actions, intercept his correspondence, marry him herself if she could! And the jade had earned her money fairly enough. Fairly enough he must admit. What an intriguing, unscrupulous little devil it was! The old sinner chuckled and gasped, and grew so weak at this stage of his narrative that Norah, propping him on his pillows, thought it was all over, and she would hear no more.

But he recovered to bid her mark that he was going fast, and she would soon find he had at least thought of her welfare at the very time he felt most unhappy that he could not win her entire affections. There had been a handsome provision made for her in case of his insanity. He was mad from the first he said; he always knew it! At his death she would succeed to Oakover and everything he had to leave. It was a dull place, Oakover, in a dull country! A fellow had better be dead and buried at once than obliged to live in such a hole as that, but he wouldn't have her cut the Avenue. No, it would make the place look like a private mad-house to cut the Avenue. He should know what a private mad-house was if anybody did. There had been a clause in his will by which she was to forfeit the estate if she married again. But he had made that all right. When did she think? Why, just before they went abroad, when he began to feel she could never care for him as he wished. Oh, he had fought fair! At least, he had done nothing beyond the rules of the game. He could not bring himself to wish even now that he had let Gerard alone, and withdrawn from the contest. He had never been beat, never, till forced to yield under this accursed family affliction that had beaten the best of the Vandeleurs for many generations. Well, Norah was always a good, kind-hearted girl; she would forgive him, perhaps, after he was gone. The mischief wasn't irremediable, when you came to think of it. Why, Fanny Draper might die, or be divorced more likely—that vixen never could keep steady, not if she married a duke! And then, when Norah was settled at Oakover with Gerard, she would think kindly of old John Vandeleur. She wouldn't turn his picture to the wall, would she? And she had better let the Avenue alone. He was getting tired now, and he thought he should like to go to sleep a little.

It is needless to say there were doctors in plenty round

Vandeleur's deathbed. They shook their heads as they marked his faint breathing and the waxen placidity into which his features were subsiding, handsome even yet in the dignity of approaching immortality. But one of these wise men whispered that a crisis had arrived, and it was the last chance for life. Norah, only now awakening to the perfidy of which she had been a victim, only now realising the liberty that dawned on her, the possibility of happiness that might still fall to her lot, hated herself for the guilty start of apprehension with which she heard there was yet this vague hope of a reprieve. Then she went and prayed on her knees that the black drop might be wrung out of her heart, returning to her husband's bedside with an honest wish for his recovery, and tending him once more with all the gentle care she had bestowed during his long-protracted illness. But he never knew her again. Towards midnight he breathed harder, muttering his first wife's name. She heard him distinctly ask for "Margaret" more than once ere he relapsed into a tranquil sleep, from which he passed calmly and insensibly through the gates of death. All this came back to her now, sitting in her solitary drawing-room with eyes fixed on the fire. All this, and a good deal more. It was well, no doubt, to be handsome, rich, free, unincumbered; above all, it was well to have been able, at a moment's notice and without personal inconvenience, to cancel her obligations to Mr. Burton; but the White Rose felt, nevertheless, very much as Burns's Scottish maiden in the difficulty of choice which ladies of all ranks have to encounter. Many an aching heart under satin corset, as under serge bodice, has echoed the burden of her bitter plaint,—

> "What care I in riches to wallow,
> If I may not marry Tam Glen!"

Mrs. Vandeleur could appreciate the advantages of her position, for she was a lady of refinement and education, but she was also a true-hearted woman, and would rather have worked for her daily bread in a two-pair-back with Gerard Ainslie, than live, as she did now, in one of the prettiest houses in London without him. She had heard of his accession to fortune, and rejoiced in it, she firmly believed, with all her heart and soul. In this notion she egregiously deceived herself. My own conviction is, that she would have been much better pleased to have found him without a penny, and to have had the delight of lavishing on him, from her own stores, everything he most wished for in the world. Besides, there

was one startling consideration. As little prone to jealousy as it is possible for a woman to be, the White Rose was yet not wholly invulnerable to that uncomfortable sentiment. She speculated, reasonably enough, on the unlikelihood that such a man as she esteemed her former lover should pass scathless through the fascinating ranks of her own sex, when, in addition to his natural advantages, he came to possess the adventitious aids of wealth and position. Somebody would be sure to make love to him; she could think of a dozen on the instant. It was impossible but that he would respond.

"And how can I help it?" murmured Mrs. Vandeleur, pushing her chair back from the glowing fire which had scorched her face and eyes to some purpose. "What can I do if we never meet? I can't go and call upon him, and I do believe he has quite forgotten everything, for he has never been to call upon me!"

The words, half-spoken, had risen to her lips, when the door was thrown open, and Robert Smart announced a visitor, without the slightest emotion, as "Mr. Ainslie!" On the stage, at such a crisis, ladies have the unspeakable advantage of fainting dead away "opposite prompter" into the very arms of the favoured lover, to be brought to again when the fiddle has played eight bars, and they have gained a few moments to recollect their cue and think of what they ought to say next. But in real life, unexpected emotion only makes people look foolish instead of interesting. And if the well-drilled servant had remained another second in the drawing-room, which he did not, he would have considered his mistress a fitting inmate of that Asylum for Females of Weak Intellect which he so often passed with the carriage on its way to Kew Gardens, and her visitor, whom he did not think it his business to recognise, an escaped lunatic fresh from the incurable ward at St. Bethlehem's. Both stood for a moment trembling, stupefied, open-mouthed; then they shook hands, muttering something about "such a long time," and "didn't know you were in town." After which a blank, alarming pause, and Gerard was glad to sit down in the nearest chair, clinging instinctively to his hat as the drowning man holds on to a lifebuoy.

With a woman's inborn tact she would have given him time to recover, feeling herself the necessity of a moment's breathing-space; but he was too far gone to take advantage of such forbearance, and plunged headlong into conversation. He had not spoken with her since they parted, avowed lovers, all those years ago. Looking on her face again—or rather

at the hem of her garment, for he scarce could trust himself to meet her eyes, not knowing they were studying the pattern of the hearth-rug—he felt in every fibre of his being that the present moment was worth all the sorrow and anxiety of a lifetime; that she was dearer to him, if possible, than ever; and this was the original remark he chose to make: "What a lovely day, Mrs. Vandeleur! So pleasant after our long frost." She took a good look at him now. He was very much what she expected; a little browner, perhaps, and broader-shouldered, but the eyes and smile were Gerard's. In a moment, too, something of manner, gesture, perhaps the tremble in his voice, told her woman's instinct that he was her Gerard still. She gained confidence rapidly, and answered with commendable steadiness, "The old story in our English climate, Mr. Ainslie—no two days alike. Unchanged even in its changes. You—you won't find anything much changed since you went away." She was not; he could tell that now when he found courage to look in her winsome face. The witch was as bewitching as ever; a little paler, he thought, than the girl he had seen every night by those watchfires in his dreams; darker of hair, perhaps; fuller in form; the features even more delicately cut than Miss Welby's; but with the old queenly air, the well-remembered grace of gesture; above all, the tender, fleeting smile that lingered less about her mouth than in those deep, dreamy, loving eyes. He had thought her more changed that night in the summer, when he caught a glimpse of her getting into her carriage after the ball. She saw right through his heart, no doubt, as women can, without looking at him, and flushed with a pleasure not devoid of triumph. It was something, after all, to have reigned thus without a rival, against hope itself. She talked on about all sorts of indifferent subjects,—her house, her furniture, her engagements, the last French play, the first Italian opera,—and Gerard, smoothing his hat vehemently (for all his wanderings had not eradicated this instinct of civilised life), began to feel more collected and rational, less as if he was swimming aimlessly to and fro some five fathom under water without a hope of coming to the surface. Presently he abandoned his hat, and edged his chair a little nearer the White Rose.

"Do you know what brought me here to-day?" he asked, rather abruptly.

"Because you never came near me when I was in town last year," she answered, with a bright, mischievous smile, that took him back like magic to the lawn and the cedars at

Marston Rectory. "I know more about you than you think. Why, I knew you were back before you had been a month in England."

She stopped short and turned crimson, wishing she had not said so much.

"I only heard to-day of all your generosity," he continued eagerly. "Don't think me ungrateful; don't think me unfeeling. I've never thanked you; I've never written to you. How could I last summer? What excuse had I for coming near you? And yet I saw you once. I watched for you leaving a ball. I waited all night, and you came out at last. You dropped a flower. Mrs. Vandeleur, I have got it still!"

She had taken a screen from the chimney-piece; that fire scorched her cheeks so fiercely! Her face was hid, and she answered not a word; but he could see the handle shaking in her grasp, and it gave him courage to go on.

"I know everything now," he continued, "and you shall know everything too. I loved you, Mrs. Vandeleur, as you cannot have forgotten, when I was a raw, headstrong boy. I love you still (I may say so now you are free), being a worn and somewhat disheartened man. People will tell you such things are a romance, an impossibility. Mrs. Vandeleur, do you believe in them?"

He wanted to fix her. It was not so easy. She kept the screen to her face and murmured, "You have had plenty of time to forget me."

"But I couldn't forget you!" he exclaimed. "I never shall now. It is no use talking or thinking of what might have been. I loved you at nineteen, and I have loved you my whole life. You only *liked* me, and—and—is it not the truth, Mrs. Vandeleur?—when somebody else came and asked you, I—I was discarded and put aside!"

She dropped the screen at last. She rose to her feet. She turned on him those wondrous eyes, and in their depths he read regret, reproach, forgiveness, and unalterable affection.

"Gerard!" was all she could find voice to say, but the tone was enough. It brought him to her side; his arm stole round her waist; her head rested on his shoulder; and so, with loving words and happy tears, the whole tale of perfidy, sorrow, estrangement, and eventual sacrifice, came to an end.

"And there is nothing between us now," she said, glancing at her own black garments, and wondering in her heart whether it was very wicked to feel so thankful she had become a widow.

"Nothing!" repeated Gerard, thinking only of Vandeleur's

fate, and grimly deciding that, all things considered, it served him right.

"Except," continued Norah, and hesitated. She was going to add, "Except your own wife," but forbore to mention that tie, partly from motives of delicacy, remembering to have heard of Mrs. Ainslie's elopement with a Frenchman; and partly because of a report which had reached her long ago, and to which she had given too ready credence, of that lady's death.

He observed her hesitation, and though he thought little of it at the time, remembered it afterwards.

It was strange that, during the whole of this interview, the idea of Fanny's existence should not once have crossed her husband's mind. He had, indeed, for years tacitly admitted the probability of her decease, and was more persuaded than ever that he was a widower, since she had not applied to him for assistance on his accession to wealth; but it was, nevertheless, somewhat rash to accept for a certainty the freedom that rested on such a problematical assumption as a wife's death, simply because she had given no notice she was alive. Gerard would doubtless have taken a more practical view of his own position, but that this long-lost happiness found again, this realisation of the dream which had for years been cherished but as a dream, was too much for his philosophy, and any little remnants of common sense that might have helped him were completely scattered by the prospect of claiming the White Rose at last for his own, to wear her proudly and thankfully next his heart for life.

Time passes quickly in such interviews. He had been there more than an hour, and neither of them thought ten minutes had elapsed since his arrival. He would have stayed as long again, in all probability, but for a peal at the door-bell announcing more visitors. Norah started, and stretched out her hand to wish him good-bye. When their hearts are gone, people generally lose their heads. With a hurried promise to meet again on the morrow, with a whispered blessing, and one long, clinging, passionate kiss, Gerard was downstairs and in the hall as soon as the servant whose duty it was to answer the door.

On the steps stood a gentleman with a card-case in his hand. It was none other than Dandy Burton, who still entertained an ardent desire, founded chiefly on pique, to re-establish his former footing of friendship with Mrs. Vandeleur. He had not been aware till to-day that her servants were forbidden to admit him. He learned it now, when, meeting a

visitor face to face coming out, he was told by the footman Mrs. Vandeleur was "not at home."

The Dandy groaned a curse, deep, bitter, and unforgiving, between his teeth, but accosted Gerard with perfect good-humour and cordiality, like a man of the world, as he was. The former fellow-pupils had already met more than once since Ainslie's accession to fortune, but though their acquaintance was renewed, all its boyish frankness and mutual goodwill had died out. They did not like each other now, had scarcely an idea, certainly not a sentiment in common. Consequently their "Good-bye" was more hearty than their "How-d'ye-do?" To-day they walked arm-in-arm from Mrs. Vandeleur's door to the end of the street, and there parted with exceeding goodwill. Both had much to occupy their thoughts. The Dandy, who could not fail to notice his companions glistening eye, buoyant step, and general air of blissful preoccupation, began to suspect how the land lay, and resolved forthwith to lose no time in shaping a spoke that should fit their wheel to a nicety! While Gerard, in all the engrossing ecstasies of a man who has just realised his ideas of Paradise, wanted no society but his own, certainly was least of al disposed for that of one against whom his instincts warned him as an obstacle in his path.

Something told him that even if he wanted the power, the Danly had all the will to become his rival.

CHAPTER XLIII

"LOST, STOLEN, OR STRAYED"

MOST of us have some friend in the world on whom we think we are justified in inflicting our grievances, confidences, sorrows, and chiefly our scrapes. Out of the latter we expect him to pull us, though he should go in up to his neck on our behalf; and we generally favour him with a good deal of bad temper on our own account, and personal abuse, which we call plain-speaking, if he venture to differ with us in opinion on the very subjects for which we demand his advice. Such a friend was Dolly Egremont to many of his own intimates. To none more than Gerard Ainslie. The latter had not proceeded one hundred yards in the direction of Grosvenor Place ere conviction came full upon him, that Dolly, and nobody but Dolly, must be collared and consulted forthwith.

I have said that the idea of Mrs. Ainslie's existence had in no wise tempered the first glow of happiness kindled by Gerard's interview with his old love, but such an immunity could not last long after the glamour of the White Rose's presence had passed away. In the very middle of the first crossing he traversed, it came upon him like a flash, that unless he could positively certify Fanny's death; could go wooing, so to speak, with the very proofs in his hand, he was not only committing a crying sin by the woman he married, but—and in his eyes this was perhaps even a more serious consideration—inflicting a deadly injury on the woman he loved. Of course she must be dead! He always revered to that, I fear, with but little feeling of compunction or remorse, cherishing, like men in general, a persuasion that on them has been laid the whole weight of an unhappy marriage, that they alone are the sufferers, and that, although she never asked them, although they themselves must have taken the initiative, and at some stage of the proceedings must have walked into the pit with their eyes open, the whole business is solely the woman's fault!

Gerard, then, felt chiefly anxious to prove the death of one whom heretofore he had so ill-advisedly vowed to love and to cherish. It would be difficult, of course, to obtain information at such a distance of time, exceedingly inconvenient to institute inquiries which must be pursued abroad no less than at home. Even at so late a stage of the proceedings, every day that could be gained was in his favour. Dolly must be consulted forthwith. In a quarter of an hour Gerard was threading his way through the narrow streets about Leicester Square in search of the Accordion.

To find a theatre by daylight is almost as difficult as to follow a bridle-road in the dark. Gerard foolishly abandoned his cab, and was soon lost in a labyrinth of lanes and alleys, in which the staple commodities seemed to be gin, oysters, stale vegetables, penny ballads, second-hand furniture, and old clothes. Steadily pursuing his researches, I think he must have failed at last, but that he came into unexpected collision with Mr. Barrington-Belgrave, who bounced out of a dirty doorway in a dead wall covered with hanging strips of tattered red-letter advertisements.

That gentleman's greeting was cold and haughty. Mr. Belgrave felt aggrieved that he should have seen less of the man whom he had befriended in distress since "Fortune," as he beautifully expressed it, "had showered her sunniest smiles upon her minion." The actor lifted his hat with stately politeness, and would have passed on, but that Gerard caught his hand and held him by main force.

"You ought to know," said he, "if anybody does. I want to find the Accordion Theatre."

His manner was frank as usual. Mr. Belgrave, however, totally unmollified, replied with freezing dignity, "I certainly am not likely to forget the workshop where I make my daily bread. With some persons, nevertheless, memory on such matters is not to be trusted. Step in there, Mr. Ainslie. I wish you good-morning, sir."

So Ainslie stepped in, a little surprised at the dignity of his former friend, but attributing it in his ignorance to some part he was fresh from studying, and of which he could not at once shake off the tragic deportment and majestic air required. He found himself in a dark passage, apparently leading nowhere; but hearing Dolly's voice, made for the sound. Opening a door by groping till he found its handle, he entered a small uncomfortable room, with no carpet, fitted up like an office, save for a few such incongruous articles as buff-boots, stage jewellery, false hair, rouge-pots,

and sham swords. Here he discovered Dolly and Mr. Bowles, with a cheque-book before them, and an expression on the countenance of either that denoted a summing-up of accounts in which expenditure had exceeded income.

"What, Gerard!" exclaimed Dolly in as hearty a voice as ever, but looking more anxious than usual. "How did you find your way here? Not come about the play, have you?"

Gerard answered in the negative, and thought he detected a glance of congratulation exchanged by the two managers.

"Play!" said he, "hang the play! I'd forgotten all about it. I've got something of much more importance to talk to you about. We'll go back together, Dolly. If I'm not in the way I'll wait here till you are ready."

"I'm ready now," answered his friend, shuffling a lot of papers together and cramming them into a drawer. After a whispered dialogue with Mr. Bowles, in which were to be distinguished such words as "exorbitant terms," "impatient public," "novelty," "attraction," and "New York," he took Gerard's arm, and sallied forth into the street.

"The fact is," said Dolly confidentially, and in accents of relief as they heard the stage-door of the Accordion clang to behind them, "we've got a speculation on hand now that will either be the best hit a manager ever made, or shut up our shop altogether. The consequence is I am never out of the theatre. To-morrow's a clear day, but it's the first I've had for a month. To me, indeed, my dear Jerry, I do assure you, 'all the world's a stage, and all the men and women d——d bad players!' I never was so harassed in my life. Now we've got this American star coming over—this Madame Molinara—and she's to make all our fortunes. Such a beauty, they say; such an actress, and such a Tartar to deal with. If she don't draw twice as many people as the house will hold every night, we shan't pay our expenses,—I can see that already. Everything is to be found her, my boy; and her dressmaker's bill would swamp a lifeboat. I was running up a few items just now when you came in, 'and I would that my tongue could utter the oaths that arose in me.' I've agreed, too, Jerry, that's the worst of it. Given in to all her terms, and I dare not even think of them. Well, 'the stately ships go down,' you know, and perhaps hers may. I'm almost beast enough to wish she was at the bottom of the Atlantic, upon my soul!"

"I wish with all my heart she was!" answered Gerard, laughing. "I want to talk to you about something else. I

want you to help me. Dolly, you must stand by me like a brick. I'm going to be the happiest fellow in England."

Honest Dolly's face brightened at once. Whatever sorrows this gentleman cherished of his own, it was in his nature to put them aside when he could serve a friend, and of him La Rochefoucauld's aphorism was not true, "that there is something gratifying to everyone in the misfortunes of his neighbours."

"I'm your man," said he. "Wicket-keeper, cover-point, slip, or long-stop—you bowl the twisters, I'll do the fielding for you. Hang it, Jerry, when you and I get together, I feel as if we were boys again. I sometimes wish we were," he added rather wistfully.

I believe that with old schoolfellows, even men of sixty go back into boyhood, and are capable, at least in fancy, of knuckling down at marbles, bolstering in bedrooms, robbing apple-trees, cribbing verses, and taking floggings with the fortitude of boyish bravado. Gerard Ainslie, bronzed and bearded, here in the streets of London, answered as he might have done when a smooth-faced boy in Mr. Archer's pupil-room.

"Don't jaw, Dolly. Hold on, and listen to me. You never were a sneak. You and I always went partners in everything, and have not failed each other yet. Will you see me through the great 'go-in' of my life, now?"

"Till all's blue!" answered the other in the same vernacular; and then his friend, with many interruptions from basket-women, street-sweepers, loitering cabs and thundering omnibuses, disclosed as a profound secret his attachment to the White Rose—an announcement that created no surprise whatever—and his intention to be married to her without delay, a determination that drew from Dolly a protracted and discouraging whistle.

"There is but one difficulty," insisted Gerard, waxing eager and eloquent as he warmed to the subject, "but one obstacle in my way, and that, you will say, is not easily surmounted. I cannot at present obtain conclusive proofs of my wife's death. What makes me think she is dead? Why, of course she must be. You don't suppose, Dolly, that woman would have left me alone if she had been above ground when I came into some money? If she's not dead, I could divorce her. Oh, nonsense! I know I could. Time has nothing to do with it. But there's no occasion for anything of the kind. I tell you she is dead. I am as sure of it as that you and I are opposite the Burlington Arcade at

this moment. I must prove it, that's all. Prove it, and then, at last, Dolly, I shall win the prize I have been praying for all my life."

Before they parted it may easily be supposed that Dolly Egremont had pledged himself heart and hand to the assistance of his friend.

CHAPTER XLIV

"OLD GRITS"

IN pursuance, then, of the compact between this Damon and Pythias, Dolly started for the country by a very early train the following morning, it having been arranged that he should employ his one day of leisure in a journey to Ripley Mill, while Gerard took steps for following up the necessary inquiries in town.

It may not be out of place here to observe that Mr. Egremont was at this period in a fit state for any expedition involving expenditure of surplus energy, endurance of physical discomfort, or defiance of personal danger. He found himself in that abnormal mood which, according to their several characters, impels men to play high stakes at a gaming-table, to traverse the Rocky Mountains on half-rations, or to cross the Atlantic in a yawl. Dolly felt sore and sick at heart, all the more so that the part of a disconsolate suitor was quite out of keeping with his frank manly nature and hopeful disposition. Nevertheless, truth to tell, he worried himself a good deal about Miss Tregunter, and his sorrow, which dated now some months back, rather increased than diminished with the lapse of time.

It is curious how differently people act under the different sentiments of friendship and love. If a man feels aggrieved by any imaginary neglect or unkindness from some tried comrade for whom he entertains a sincere regard, he asks simply for an explanation, and in three words their good understanding is re-established as firmly as ever; but with a woman, who is, after all, the more easily reconciled of the two, he adopts a diametrically opposite system. He usually commences with a levity of conduct and bitterness of speech intended to force on her the conviction that he has no value for her good opinion whatever; from this kind and considerate treatment he proceeds to a course of distant politeness and sulky withdrawal of his society, effectually shutting out from her every opportunity of making amends or even asking what

she has done to offend, and finishes perhaps by a series of false accusations, a storm of unjustifiable reproaches, through which she thinks herself fortunate if she can perceive the blue sky of forgiveness beyond.

Dolly Egremont had as yet only reached the second stage of this uncomfortable and intermittent malady. He was sulking with Jane Tregunter, was trying to persuade himself he did not care for her, never had cared for her, never would care for her, nor for any other woman in the world! He had a right, he thought, to feel aggrieved. This young lady had left town shortly after her refusal of Dandy Burton's offer without vouchsafing to Dolly any notice of her intentions, or informing him of her destination. The fact is, Miss Tregunter, judging with more worldly wisdom than might have been expected from her character, was exceedingly jealous of her admirer's connection with the Accordion and its snares. She hated the very name of an actress, she almost hated Dolly himself for associating with that amusing and fascinating class. Burton, in his first and second parallels, before risking a final attack, had made no small use of this offensive engine in his plan of operations; especially had he insisted on the dangerous charms of Madame Molinara, the American star, who was always coming, but never came; and this was the more unfair because Dolly, as we know, had not set eyes on the syren who, yet a thousand leagues off, could cause poor Janey such disquietude. Here, again, a personal interview of ten minutes, a frank explanation of as many words, would have set everything right. But that explanation was never granted, those words remained unspoken. Miss Tregunter took herself off to the Continent, and made no sign. It was a long and dreary winter to the manager of the Accordion. How many letters for Nice or Mentone he began and tore up unfinished to litter the waste-paper basket beneath his table, it is not for me to calculate. I believe that the counter-irritation produced by his correspondence with Madame Molinara did him a world of good. I believe if Miss Tregunter had remained abroad altogether he might eventually have attained a permanent cure. But, confound her! she came back. The *Morning Post* took good care to tell him she was in England, tracking her steps, however, with considerable delicacy, no farther inland than the Pavilion Hotel, Folkestone. And behold Dolly in perpetual fever and discomfort once more! Would she write now? She might find a thousand excuses! Or should he? Perhaps she had

forgotten him outright. Women, he had always heard, both on and off the stage, were exceedingly prone to forget. Six months was a long time—foreign travel a wondrous distraction. He thought, with some sinking of the heart, how many charming French marquises, Italian counts, Russian diplomatists, and Austrian officers might have made themselves agreeable to the fresh English *mees* while he was minding his rehearsals at the Accordion. What a fool he had been to care for her! It only made him wretched. Much better give it up! Yes, he would give it up, once for all, and devote himself entirely to the business he had taken in hand for his friend.

Dolly arrived at this sensible conclusion by the time he reached the railway station, to establish himself in a first-class carriage with a wrapper over his knees, and a number of the *Fortnightly Review*, which he did not even think of cutting, in his hand. Whirling into the soft spring landscape of the real country, he found the job not quite so easy as he expected. Jane Tregunter had somehow mixed herself up with the morning sky and the budding hedges, the lambs frolicking in the meadow, the rooks flapping heavily off the new-turned plough. When he got out for breakfast at Shunter's Junction, the Hebe who made his tea, though it must be admitted no two people could be found more unlike, brought forcibly to his mind the woman he had resolved to think of no more. By the time he reached Ripley Station, two miles from Oakover, he had forgiven her from the bottom of his heart, only wished her well, and felt he would willingly give a whole season's profits of the Accordion just to see her once again.

Walking through the familiar lanes and footpaths about Oakover and Ripley, crossing the stiles he had jumped so often in his boyhood, scanning the orchards and meadows, all so little altered, save that their dimensions had unaccountably decreased, Dolly felt too surely that the old love contracted insensibly in boyhood had grown to be a part of himself, that to tear it away was to deprive him of the best and noblest in his nature, that for his own sake it was far better to cherish it pure and loyal, even though hopeless and unreturned, than harden to the selfishness of cynicism, or sink in the mire of reckless indulgence and dissipation. He resolved, then, that he would at least continue her friend, that he would tell her so frankly and candidly the first time he had an opportunity, that he would rejoice in her happiness, and do all in his power to increase its stability, even

though the edifice should be reared on the ruins of his own.

Then he shook himself free from the one ruling idea, raised his head, and walked on feeling, he knew not why, a happier and a better man. Following the well-remembered path to the mill, and looking on the sluggish stream, the quiet fertile meadow, the orchard trees just coming into bud, he could hardly believe so many years had elapsed since he used to escape joyfully from Archer's pupil-room, and wander down here in the soft spring weather, just like to-day, for a glance at the trimmers, a pot of mild ale, and a chat with old Grits.

Was the miller alive? He had barely time to ask himself that question ere he saw the old man in person leaning an arm on the half-door of his bolting-room, scanning the meadows with a grim wrinkled frown just as he used to do all those years ago. It seemed as if he had never moved since Dolly saw him last.

"How do you do, Mr. Draper?" said the visitor, walking briskly up the garden-path between the fresh-dug beds. "I know you, but you don't know me."

Old Grits gave an ominous grunt. "Like enough," he answered, "and maybe I doesn't want to."

"Look again," replied Dolly, no whit disconcerted; "you had a better memory when I was here last. Come, Mr. Draper, now haven't you seen me before?"

The miller scanned him from head to foot, and Dolly could observe how the wrinkles had deepened under their thick coating of flour on the old man's face. His temper, too, seemed the rustier for age. After a prolonged stare he shook his head, observing scornfully, "There's a fresh crop of fools comes up every seed-time. One more or less make small odds with spring drawing on."

Dolly laughed outright, and something in his laugh recalled him to the old man's recollection. Wiping his hand sedulously on his trousers ere he proffered it, the miller opened the half-door and bade his guest step in.

"Your servant, sir—your servant," he repeated nervously. "I know you now, I ask your pardon. You be one o' Mr. Archer's young gentlemen—the lusty 'un" (he had obviously forgotten his name). "Walk in, sir,—walk in. I be proud to see you. I thought you'd a drawed down nigh a score more, though, when you'd grow'd to be a man."

This in a tone of mournful soliloquy, as of one disappointed, disheartened, but accepting such disillusions for the inevitable drawbacks of life.

"I'm glad to see you looking so hearty," said Dolly cheerfully, while he seated himself in the well-known wooden chair, and filled a glass of the ale brought in by a red-cheeked, red-armed lass as like the original Jane of careless memory as she could stare, which indeed she did to some purpose at the well-dressed visitor. "Here's your health, Mr. Draper, and long may you keep it. Why, you're not a day older than when we used all to come down here for an afternoon's fishing after study. Ah! how many years is that ago?"

Cunning Dolly was working round to his point. Old Draper's shaggy brows lowered, and his trembling hand jingled the ale-jug against the tip of his glass.

"My service to you, sir," said he, setting it down after but a modest sip. "Ah! it's not so many years, maybe, but there's been great changes, great changes, up at Oakover, and down here at Ripley, since you and me lifted the trimmer with the seven-pound Jack on the night Mr. Vandeleur come by and took it home in his carriage. Yes, I remember of you now quite well, sir. Mr. Egremont, if I'm not mistaken. You was always a keen chap for the fishing, and now Squire's gone, and Madam, she do never come to the Hall. And there's them missed from the mill down here as used to—as used to—well, as used to come in and out, merry enough and bright enough to thaw an anchor-frost[1] on the mill-wheel. Ah, young master! if it's them as lives longest as learns most, it's them too as has most to forget. I do know as my memory's failing—I do sometimes wish he were gone for good and all."

Dolly looked round the room to avoid the old man's eyes, in which tears were rising fast. On a table near the window he observed a woman's straw hat, a watering-pot, and a pair of gardening gloves. He almost started. Could it be possible that the very person whose death he had come here to ascertain was alive and merry in the house? Old Grits followed his visitor's glance.

"Theer they be," said he huskily, "and theer they'll bide till she come in at that theer door, or till I be carried out on it. They be ready for ye, my pretty, never fear, them wot you was allus used to weer, and well they became ye—more's the pity! Ay, beauty's a snare maybe, but there wasn't such a one to look at not in a dozen parishes round. Look'ee here,

[1] Anchor-frost—a term peculiar to millers, signifying a degree of cold so intense as to clog with ice the mill-wheel below the water-surface. A metaphor apparently drawn from the idea that the river's bed is frozen so hard, it could not hold an anchor.

Mr. Egremont—I mind your name now, sir—I've a been to their bow-meeting and what-not at Oakover, and see all the quality, ah! for twenty mile and more. If you'd taken and bolted of 'em nine times over, they'd never have looked more nor 'seconds' by the side of my Fan. Yes; you may come when you like, my pretty. It's all ready for you, and I got a new ribbon for your hat—was it last Ripley feast? I don't well mind; Lady-day comes round so often now, and never a blink of fair spring weather from year's end to year's end."

It seemed obvious to Dolly that her father at least believed Mrs. Ainslie was still alive, and he could pursue his inquiries therefore with less circumspection.

"I ought to have asked after my old friends when I sat down," said he; "I haven't forgotten any of them. Is it long, Mr. Draper, since you have heard from your daughter?"

"Daughter!" exclaimed the miller in a voice that shook painfully, notwithstanding the pitch to which it was raised. "Who told you as I'd got a daughter? There were a little maid here long ago as used to play in and out o' that theer door, and hold on tight by Daddy's finger when us went to peep at the big wheel like on the sly. There were a likely lass, as I've been tellin' ye, what used to busk her gown and comb her long black hair in that theer room behind you, and come out singing till the whole place turned as merry as a christening and as bright as a sunrise. The Lord's above all, and I've got two noble sons as lusty as yourself, Mr. Egremont, doing well in their business and honouring of their father. I ain't unthankful for it. But I've never had a daughter not since that day my Fan left me with a lie in her mouth, to go away with that slim chap as was a friend of yours, Mr. Egremont. You'll excuse me, sir; you was always a gentleman, you was, but don't let that chap and me ever come a-nigh. There'll be blood between us, there will! Ah! she allus used to write afore he come and tuk her forrin. I'll never believe as she'd forsake me of her own free will, like this here. Ah, little Fan, little Fan! I'll not last long. Come back to me before I'm gone! It's all ready for you. Come back whenever you've a mind!"

The miller fairly broke down, and hid his face in his hands. Dolly endeavoured to console him in vain. It was obviously impossible to obtain any information from the hurt, heart-broken father, and after a few common-place expressions of sympathy and condolence, Dolly thought the greatest kindness he could do his host was to finish his beer and depart as promptly as he might.

CHAPTER XLV

THE LITTLE RED ROVER

IT was not much past noon when Mr. Egremont turned his back on the mill, a good deal disappointed with the result of his researches, intending to retrace his steps to Ripley Station, and take the first train for London. Obviously Draper was in his dotage, and no clear intelligence could be gained from that quarter. He had observed, too, while the old man rambled on about his daughter, an expression on the maid-servant's face that seemed to denote contempt and impatience, as though her master's hallucination were unquestionable, and of such frequent recurrence as to become wearisome. Altogether, Dolly felt puzzled on his friend's account, and began to relapse into low spirits on his own. Notwithstanding the quiet promise of the fresh spring day, life seemed darker than usual. Was it worth while to take so much trouble about matters which resolved themselves, after all, into the vaguest uncertainties? Everybody was fishing, but nobody ever seemed to catch anything. Reflecting on the habits and pursuits of his own acquaintances, he could not think of one who sat down in peace, contented with his lot. Dandy Burton considered himself a model philosopher of the modern school; but the Dandy, in spite of his training, could not conceal the habitual restlessness and anxiety in which he lived. Gerard Ainslie possessed everything in the world to make him happy, but here he was in hot water about Mrs. Vandeleur! The poor old man at the mill had nearly gone out of his mind for lack of his daughter; and he himself, Dolly Egremont, one of the most popular fellows in London, manager of the Accordion Theatre, with health, strength, a good conscience, and a balance at his banker's, detected a cloud before the sun; because, forsooth, an ignorant young woman with a little red in her cheeks had of late betrayed her own want of common sense in not appreciating him as he deserved. The malady from which this gentleman suffered has been compared with

some propriety to fever and ague. Walking through the meadows by the riverside, he felt the cold fit coming on. Doing violence to his loyalty, he began even to depreciate Miss Tregunter's exterior ; and this is a very virulent form of shivers indeed. Was she so good-looking after all? Nay, even granting her attractions, what was beauty itself at the best?—a mere anatomical arrangement, a combination of certain tissues and properties, simply disgusting when analysed and taken in detail! Why should all the world be at sixes and sevens about these painted dolls, differing from a child's toy but in their powers of mischief? Were not women a mistake? Should we not do better without them?

He laid his hand on a stile and vaulted into a wide grass-grown lane with high hedges on either side, and a few cart-tracks cutting deep into the soft elastic turf. In a twinkling—his eye was quick or he would have missed it—in a twinkling, a small dark object, whisking out of the hedge twenty paces off, whisked back again, to steal along the bramble-covered ditch, and cross at an angle out of sight farther on.

Dolly stood transfixed. "By Jove, it's a fox, and I've headed him!" he muttered below his breath; but his cynical reflections, his morbid misgivings of a moment back, were all scattered to the winds. His head went up, his eye brightened, his whole frame quivered with keen excitement, he felt as you feel when the first whip's cap is up at the far end of the covert, and although the soft warm air be moist and still, the gorse is waving and seething like a sea in a storm beneath your favourite horse's nose.

"That's a hunted fox," continued Dolly, when he had recovered his astonishment; "the hounds must be out to-day. I'll take my oath, by the way of him, he means business!"

Dolly was right; the hounds were out, and the "little red rover" had been holding his own gallantly for the last twenty minutes, mostly over grass. There were eighteen couple on his line, twelve of which were workers, and the remaining six had better have been left at home. It may be the little red rover possessed some intuitive knowledge of the fact. It was not the first time he had been hunted by a good many since the days of his cubhood, when he used to catch field-mice, bouncing and gambolling like a kitten amongst the secluded lawns and green shrubbery-walks at Oakover; therefore, when he woke this morning, bright, glossy, brown, and beautiful, to hear the loud crack of the warning hunting-whip, lest he should be chopped in covert, succeeded by the

whimper of a puppy, the rate of a servant, and the attesting chorus of some twenty silvery tongues, he led his pursuers a gamesome dance round his stronghold, running his foil with considerable sagacity, till the peal of those vengeful voices subsided to a puzzled silence, when he made the best of his way straight across the adjacent meadows, with a quarter of a mile start, a gallant spirit under his fur coat, and a firm conviction that he could reach Belton Beeches, six miles off as the crow flies, before they caught him. The little red rover was but one, and his enemies, amongst whom, I presume, he included none of the horsemen, were Legion; yet his heart, like his little body, was *multum in parvo*, tough, tameless, and as strong as brandy. "He's a straight-necked 'un, I know," observed the first whip, well back in the saddle for an awkward ragged bullfinch, when he had hallooed the hounds away and got them fairly settled to the line. "If he don't mean the old drain at Mark's Close, he'll go straight to the Beeches. Forrard, Caroline! come up, horse!" The horse did come up, though with a scramble; Caroline, somewhat shy of thundering hoofs, scored forward to her sisters; and the keen ones, with the blood thrilling in their veins, made all the use of their horses they dared, feeling they were in for a run.

The little red rover came stealing on, nevertheless, through the silence of the wide rush-grown pastures. Sheep scattered out of his way with considerable activity, rallying and forming gallantly enough when their enemy had passed, and doing their best for his assistance by crowding in on his very track. Grave oxen looked at him wistfully out of their meek brown eyes, and turned to graze again, till they heard the pack behind, when, abandoning all their usual dignity of deportment, they lowered their heads, kicked up their heels, blew smoke from their nostrils, stuck their ox-tails on end, and blundered about the fields as if they were mad. Countess and Caroline, Driver and Dairy-maid, Mar-plot, Melody, Marigold, and the rest, hunting steadily on through all impediments, now spreading and flinging themselves with the sagacity of experience, now bustling together and driving forward with the energy of instinct, came next in succession. After these the body of the pack—the parson of the parish, and a hard-riding cornet at home on leave; then the huntsman, the first whip, nearly a quorum of magistrates, and those hounds that had better have been left at home, followed by horsemen who cross the fields, horsemen who stick to the roads, the boy on a pony, the man in a gig, the gipsy with his

donkey, and the labourer who, shouldering his spade, ran after the vanishing turmoil to have his hunt too, as far as the nearest hedge.

Of all these the little red rover was doing his best to make an example, and he met with less hindrance than might have been expected in his flight. Once, indeed, he found himself turned by a man at plough, and in the very next field to that agriculturist, ran almost into the jaws of a sheep-dog that had lost its master, and was sniffing round an out-house in disconsolate bewilderment. But the sheep-dog being young, "the little red rover" showed him such a sharp set of teeth, and so formidable a grin, as sent the poor frightened puppy scouring off at its utmost speed in a contrary direction; and, but for the steadiness of old Bountiful, the dog, instead of the fox, would have been chased, and possibly run into, by her comrades, to the immortal disgrace of the pack.

It was hard on the little red rover to be headed by Dolly Egremont, when he had come two-thirds of the distance to his haven; but although the sight of a human figure in this unfrequented lane turned him for a score of yards or so, he dauntlessly made his point after all.

Dolly stood, I say, for a moment like a man transfixed. He was drawing his breath to halloo, when the light unfrequent notes of hounds running hard reached his ear. Three or four white objects dashed into the lane where the fox had entered, followed by a rushing cataract of comrades, and the whole, throwing their tongues eagerly, swarmed through the opposite fence, to check, as was but natural, in the field beyond.

"Hark back!" shouted Dolly, in the best dog-language he could muster, tearing gloves and clothes with frantic plunges to scramble through the fence.

"D——n ye! Hold your noise!" exclaimed a voice from the far side of the other hedge, followed by the excited huntsman himself, just escaping a fall, as he landed in the lane, with his horse hard held.

"Your fox is back!" protested Dolly, breathless with exertion and enthusiasm.

"He's not! He's forrard!" replied the other, never taking his eye off his hounds. They had cast themselves nobly, and hit off the true line once more.

"Let 'em alone!" he added, in a voice of thunder, to one of the whips, who was already across the lane, prepared to interfere; and ramming the spurs into his horse, without vouchsafing a glance at Dolly, scrambled over the fence to

gallop on, with just one twang of his horn, that he couldn't have resisted to save his life.

The cornet, whose hat was stove in, and a hard-riding old gentleman who ought to have known better, followed in his wake. This succession of horses, already half-blown, made such a hole in the hedge as enabled Dolly to pass through. Though stout, he was no mean pedestrian; and on he ran at a splitting pace, keeping the hounds still in view, and intent only on seeing as much of the sport as he could.

Now the man who hunts on foot has at least one advantage over him who hunts on horseback. The former can go so straight. A hog-backed stile and a foot-board, four feet odd of strong timber with a slippery take-off, are to him articles of positive refreshment and relief. Dolly found himself able to negotiate one or two such obstacles, when the boldest horsemen were compelled to make a circuit and find a gap. He ran on, accordingly, with great enjoyment to himself, for nearly half a mile, watching the decreasing pack as they fleeted like a flock of sea-gulls over the pastures, and the foremost riders, who had again overtaken and left him behind, dipping and bobbing at the fences, as if crossing a stiff country were the easiest pastime in the world. Most of the field, too, had now straggled by, affording him an opportunity of observing the caution with which the majority of mounted sportsmen follow their favourite amusement; and after making a fruitless snatch at a loose horse, that deprived him of the little breath he had left, a deep turnip-field reduced the pedestrian first to a walk, then to a stand-still.

In this field, for reasons which will presently appear, I am forced to admit Dolly's vested interest in the little red rover ceased and determined for good and all; but the true sportsman, unless he be a master of hounds or huntsman, will not regret to learn that after a capital thing of five-and-forty minutes, this game old fox saved life and brush by entering the main-earth at Belton Beeches just as the leading hounds crashed over the wattled fence that bounded the covert, and the hard-riding cornet, with his horse done to a turn, entered the adjoining enclosure on his head. Let us hope that the little red rover may lead them many a merry dance yet ere he fulfils his destiny, and dies a glorious death in the open, under the soft November sky.

Dolly, with his hand to his side, and the perspiration rolling down his nose, was making his way to the gate, when the tramp of a horse coming up at a canter through the

turnips caused him to hurry on, without looking back, that he might open it as speedily as possible for this belated equestrian. His hand was already on the latch, the horse's nose was at his shoulder, when a voice that made him start in his mud-encumbered shoes observed softly—

"Thank you, Mr. Egremont. It's impossible to catch them now. I think it's no use my going any farther."

Dolly rubbed his eyes to be quite sure he was not dreaming, giving his hot brow the benefit of the action, and looked up in the speaker's face.

"Miss Tregunter!" he exclaimed in accents of the utmost confusion. "Why, I thought you were in Italy! What on earth are you doing here?"

"Why, haven't I as good right to be here as you?" answered the young lady playfully. "Indeed, a better, if you come to that; for I believe this very field belongs to my uncle. Besides, I am out hunting, all in proper form, with a groom I can't find, and a horse I don't fancy. Ah! if I'd had Tomboy to-day they wouldn't have slipped away from me like this, though perhaps then I should not have seen you, and it is so long since we have met."

Something in the tone of her voice sank very pleasantly in his ear. Her eyes were softer, her colour deeper, her manner more gentle than her wont. For a moment he forgot his misgivings, his resolutions, all the estrangement of the last few months, basking, as it were, in the glow of her presence, in the delight of looking once again on the face he loved so well. She saw she had lost nothing of her ascendency, and, combined with her post of vantage in the saddle, this conviction, no doubt, gave her confidence to assume a levity she did not really feel.

"But how come you to be here?" she resumed; "and in such a ridiculous costume for hunting?—umbrella, shiny boots, tall hat, go-to-meeting coat, and no horse! You've not come back to poor old Archer as a private pupil, have you? Mr. Egremont, give an account of yourself. What brought you to this part of the country?"

"I came down to find old Draper," answered straightforward Dolly, not observing a shade cross her brow, for she expected he had made the journey to look after somebody else. "I've seen him this morning, and was on my way back to the station, when I fell in with the hounds. I little thought I should meet you after wondering where you were for nearly six months."

There was something of reproach in his tone, and it

smote her to the heart. She felt that, if he really cared for her, she had been acting unkindly by him, and deserved to lose him altogether. It would be very difficult, she said to herself, to give him up. They had now arrived in the high road. He stopped as if to wish her good-bye before he took the direction of the railway station, and laid his hand on her horse's neck.

"I am going to London, Miss Tregunter," said he. "Shall I ever see you again?"

The Accordion, the actresses, the American star, all his offences of omission and commission faded from her mind. If he parted with her now, here by the sign-post, without any further explanation, would he ever come back again? She trembled to think not. He, too, dreaded the farewell as conclusive. Neither knew the power each had over the other.

Looking straight into the horizon, far beyond Belton Beeches, where the chase was at this very moment coming to an end, Miss Tregunter observed, in a faint voice, and with anything but the cordiality of a hospitable invitation, "Are you obliged to go back by the two o'clock train? Hadn't you better come on to Aunt Emily's, and have some luncheon after your run?"

Aunt Emily's, where Miss Tregunter was staying, could not have been less than four miles as the crow flies from the sign-post under which they stood, and more than twice that distance from the only station at which the up-train stopped. A more inconvenient arrangement for a traveller due in town the same evening can scarcely be imagined; nevertheless, this infatuated gentleman accepted the proposal with unconcealed delight, and in two seconds had turned his back on his destination, and was walking beside Miss Tregunter's horse with as light a step as if he had that moment emerged from bath and breakfast-room.

They must have found a good deal to say, for they talked incessantly, and a man breaking stones on the road observed the lady's head bent down once, as if to whisper. This, I think, must have been at some important stage of the dialogue — perhaps when Dolly vowed to give up the Accordion Theatre, at the end of the present season, under certain conditions, which he urged with considerable warmth. It was a long four miles, I have already said, and over one of the worst roads in England. Yet when these wayfarers entered Aunt Emily's lodge gates, I believe neither would have had the slightest objection to begin the homeward journey over again.

CHAPTER XLVI

IMMORTELLES

UT Dolly was not one who suffered his own happiness, however engrossing, to supplant the interests of his friend. Though feeling he had done good business, as he called it, for himself in his trip down to Ripley, he also remembered he had in no way furthered those researches which were his primary object in leaving London. He had nothing to tell Gerard, except that old Draper seemed in complete ignorance of his daughter's fate. He racked his brain to think what engines he could set in motion for the discovery he wished to make, and in a moment of inspiration, while hailing a hansom at the stage-door of the Accordion, it flashed across him that he had often heard extraordinary stories of the ingenuity displayed by French detectives in such difficulties as his own. He wondered he never thought of them before. Mrs. Ainslie had left her husband when abroad; that at least he knew, though he had forborne asking Gerard any further particulars of her flight. She had probably eloped with a foreigner, and must have spent at least some part of her life on the Continent. Why, of course, the French detective police, with its wonderful organisation, its mysterious intelligence, its extensive ramifications, and the unscrupulous manner in which it brought all these resources to bear on a given object, was the power to which he should have applied from the first. He began to consider how he could best put himself in communication with this formidable institution. Thus meditating, he remembered making acquaintance, a few evenings before, with Monsieur le Comte Tourbillon, attached in some undefined capacity to the French Legation, and, looking at his watch, directed his

driver to start without delay for that stronghold of diplomatic ingenuity.

It is, I presume, an indisputable fact that nobody ever gets his primary object effected by visiting a legation of any description; and Dolly felt scarcely dissatisfied — certainly not surprised—to learn from the politest of porters how monsieur le comte was absent from the Chancellerie at that instant, how he had not been there in the morning, and was not expected in the afternoon. He even thought himself fortunate in obtaining the count's address over a perfumer's in Bond Street, and drove off once more on the track with a well-defined hope of running his quarry down in this sweet-smelling retreat.

By good luck the count had not yet left home when Dolly arrived, and, with the politeness of his nation, broke out at once into profuse acknowledgments of Mr. Egremont's civility, accompanied by fervent protestations of assistance and good-will, when he learned that his visitor had already been to the Legation in search of him.

"What is it?" said the Frenchman, pushing forward a roomy arm-chair, and reaching down from the chimney-piece a deep box of cigarettes, without which sedatives it seemed impossible any conversation, involving interests of the slightest importance, could be carried on. "I speak in English, you know, mon cher. I think in English; I share your insular tastes and feelings; I begin my dinner with champagne. I rode a 'stipplechase' last autumn at Baden-Baden, — yes, very well. I back the favourite; I drive my team; I shoot my gr-r-rouse! Figure to yourself that I am a veritable Briton — what you call true blue. Take one of these cigarettes; they are of all that is finest in tobacco. And now say, then, what can I do for you?"

Dolly lit his cigarette, and observed thoughtfully between the whiffs—

"Your detective police, count, is, I fancy, the best in Europe?"

The count laid his finger to his nose as only a Frenchman can, while he replied dictatorially—

"For repression? No! For retribution—for finesse—for perseverance — for eventual discovery? Yes — a hundred times 'yes'! You remember that murder in the Rue Castiglione, and the number of suspected persons involved? An apple-woman, a pensioner, a convict who had fulfilled his sentence, a Swiss governess, an English butler, the cripple who lived on the third floor, a hospital nurse, the night-

porter, and a child ten years of age. It is true none of these were convicted, but our police arrested them all! You have not forgotten the robbery of diamonds in open day from the shop of one Louvet, opposite the gardens of the Tuileries? One brigand wedged the door, whilst his accomplice broke the window, and carried off a parure valued at eighty thousand francs. The shopman saw the man, the sentry at the garden gate saw the man, six bystanders deposed on oath that they could identify the man, and pointed out the very house in which he took refuge. Well, our police hunted and hunted, like bloodhounds, till they ran him down at last; but it was unfortunately in the Morgue, and I fear nobody ever knew what became of the diamonds. Then there was that atrocious and daring murder committed by the man in the blouse, close to the Barrière de l'Etoile, in presence of a hundred witnesses. The assassin walked up to an old gentleman who was a creditor for a sum of fifteen hundred francs, and shot him deliberately in the bosom with a pistol, which is at this moment in the hands of our police. Less than an hour elapsed ere they were on his track. They arrested his mistress, his blanchisseuse, the boy who blacked his boots. They took possession of his furniture, clothing, and effects; they traced him from Paris to Versailles, from Versailles back to Paris, thence to Chalons-sur-Marne, Strasburg, and across the Rhine into Prussia. Back through Belgium to France, they were very close on him at the frontier, and a man answering his description in many particulars was taken, descending from the coupé of a first-class carriage, at Lille. Oh, they searched, par exemple, searched everywhere, I can tell you, my friend."

The count's cigarette was done. He paused in deep meditation.

"And they found him?" exclaimed Dolly, interested in spite of himself in so long a chase.

The count stretched out his hand for a fresh cigarette, while he answered thoughtfully, in his own language—

"On ne l'a pas trouvé, mais on le cherche toujours!"

Emboldened by so successful an issue, Dolly now begged the count's good offices in obtaining the valuable assistance of this detective police for the object he had in view.

"Comment? Vous désirez donc constater la mort de quelqu'un," said the count; "ça marche tout seul! Nothing can be more simple. Is it indiscreet to ask particulars?"

"Not the least," answered Dolly. "I have a friend who made an unhappy marriage."

"That is very possible," observed the count in parenthesis.

"This friend," continued Dolly, "has for many years lost sight of his wife. In fact, she—she ran away from him. He has every reason to believe she is dead, but has no evidence of the fact. At present he is particularly anxious to obtain positive proof."

"Precisely," answered the count; "he wants to make another unhappy marriage. I perceive"—

Dolly smiled. "I hope they are not all unhappy," replied he, thinking of a certain walk by a lady on horseback not long ago. "But in the meantime, count, we are most desirous of finding out whether or not my friend's has been dissolved by death. The lady eloped with a countryman of yours, more than ten years ago, at Homburg or Baden-Baden."

The count started.

"Une Anglaise!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Aux yeux bruns, aux cheveux noirs. Très belle! Très vive! La taille un peu forte! Pardon, mon cher. Your story interests me, that is all."

Dolly stared.

"You seem to know her," said he. "And yet where you can ever have met Fanny Draper, I own, puzzles me not a little."

"Fanni!" answered the count. "C'est ça! Fanchon; at least, I always called her Fanchon. My friend, you came to describe a person to me! I will save you the trouble. Listen, I am going to tell you. Stop me if I am wrong. Fanchon was a brunette, very handsome for an Englishwoman. Pardon: that, you know, must mean very handsome indeed. She had dark eyes, white teeth, and a high colour. She dressed her black hair in masses low down her neck, and generally wore heavy gold earrings. She spoke French badly—very badly; English with a tone, seductive enough, of your charming patois. She was rude to her husband, who looked younger than herself, and she had run away with him. Am I right?"

Dolly, whose eyes were getting rounder and rounder in sheer amazement, could but nod assent. The count proceeded in a tone of satisfaction, such as that with which a man works some beautiful problem in mathematics to a demonstration.

"They lived in a small and modest apartment opposite the Kursaal when at Homburg, and the husband played heavily—heavily, that is, for him. He was a poor man, but his manners were better than his wife's. They lived irregularly

—what we call in England, we others, 'from hand to mouth.' They were not happy in their ménage. Tiens, my friend! You need not trust to our detective police. I can give you all the information you require. This couple were in Paris in the spring of—voyons—the spring of 18—. From Paris they went to Baden, from Baden to Homburg, and at Homburg the wife left her husband with a French nobleman. Would you like to know their name? Behold, I am not yet exhausted. It was Enslee, Enslee: is it not so? Say, then, am I right? Have I been telling you a true story or a fable?"

"How did you learn all this?" gasped Dolly in the plenitude of his astonishment.

The count threw the end of his cigarette into the fireplace.

"C'est tout simple!" said he composedly. "Parbleu, c'est moi qui l'a enlevée!"

The authority was unquestionable, but the situation a little puzzling. Dolly's first feeling was the truly Anglican instinct which bade him consider this man the mortal enemy of his friend: his second, a more cosmopolitan reflection that the Frenchman had really conferred on Gerard Ainslie a very important service. Altogether, he deemed it wise to make the best of his position and emulate the other's coolness.

"And what became of her?" asked Dolly in as indifferent a tone as if he had been talking about a cat or a canary.

To increase his amazement, the count's eyes filled with tears.

"She died," he answered in a voice broken by emotion. "Pity me, my friend; she died, and I—I was not with her to arrest her last look, to catch her last sigh. This it is that excites my regret, my remorse. 'Tis true that she had left me—left me as she left her husband. The only difference was that she did not care for him, while to me she was devoted—yes, devoted! Many women have been in the same plight, I imagine, Egremont, but none I think more so than my poor Fanchon. Even at this distance of time I can recall the graceful pose in which she would stand at her window watching for my return, with her showers of light brown hair. Stay! No; that could not be Madame Enslee—I am confusing her with some of the others. Pardon, my dear Egremont, these souvenirs of the heart are apt to distract a man in the head, and I have always been of an affectionate temperament, that is why I suffer. Oh! I have suffered, I tell you, not only in this instance. Enough—to business. My most sacred feelings shall be repressed in the

cause of my friend. You wish to constater the death of this Madame Enslee? Is it not so?"

"I do indeed," answered Dolly, beginning, as he hoped, to see daylight on Gerard's behalf. "She died, you say. When?—where? Are you sure of this? How do you know?"

"I have seen her tomb!" answered the count, rising to his feet, and standing erect in the attitude of one who pronounces a funeral oration. "With trembling steps, with weeping eyes, handkerchief in hand, I visited the cemetery in which her sacred ashes repose. She lies at Brussels, my friend. From my diplomatic station here, in your great country, I look towards La Belgique, and my eyes fill with scalding tears, for I shall never see my sweet Fanchon again. Pardon my emotion, monsieur. You are a man of heart, a man of courage; you will not despise my weakness. I dined at the Hôtel de Flandres; I walked out in the peaceful sunset; I traversed the cemetery; I hung immortelles on my Fanchon's tomb; there were flowers growing round it, the walks were swept, and the grass new-mown. I recognised the attention of my friend, Prince Dolgoroukoff: he also was homme de cœur. We travelled back to Paris together, and mingled our regrets. I am a philosopher. Quoi! But philosophy can only dominate, she cannot destroy. Are you satisfied, Mr. Egremont? Bah! Let us talk of other affairs. Let us dissipate these sombre memories. I go to make a little tour in the Park. Do me the honour to accompany me. You excuse yourself; you have not time. It is my loss. Permettez, adieu, monsieur; ou plutôt, au revoir!"

So Dolly took his departure, puzzled not a little by the extraordinary confusion of feelings to which he had lately been a witness. His uninitiated palate revolted from this *salmi* of remorseful memories, habitual libertinism, and shameless depravity, spiced with a seasoning of false sentiment. Nevertheless he felt he had so far obtained good news for Gerard, and went on his way rejoicing.

It would have damped his satisfaction considerably could he have witnessed the cloud of uncertainty that overspread his informant's countenance as the latter paused on the threshold of his apartment, gloved, hatted, and equipped for a walk.

"Tiens!" said the count, putting his hand to his forehead, and trying hard to unravel the entanglement of memories it contained. "Have I deceived myself after all? Was it the English Fanchon whose grave I watered with my tears at

Brussels, or that tall girl from Innspruck, or the Alsatian blonde? How stupid I am! Fanchon! Fanchon! It is a vile habit of mine to call every woman with whom I have relations by that endearing name. It is convenient at first, no doubt; but see what confusion it makes in the end. N'importe! Fanchon, or Finette, or Fleur-de-lis, or Feu-follet, it makes little difference; the immortelles would have been withered by this time, all the same!"

CHAPTER XLVII

"SURGIT AMARI"

GERARD AINSLIE sat at breakfast in his cheerful room overlooking the park, with a bright spring sunshine pouring in on his white tablecloth, and the balmy air stealing through his open window to stir the broad sheet of his morning paper, propped against the coffee-pot. There was a tender quiver of green leaves, a fragrance of opening buds and bursting vegetation, pervading the world outside; and within, for Gerard at least, late in life as it had come, the veritable spring-tide of the heart.

He was happy, this bright morning, so happy! A kindly, well-worded letter from Dolly, detailing the interview with Count Tourbillon, had been brought by his servant when he woke, and it seemed like the announcement of freedom to a prisoner for life. True, he had given more than one gentle thought to the memory of the woman who had loved him so recklessly, deceived him so cruelly; but all sadder emotion was speedily swallowed up in the joyous reflection that now at last he might stretch his hand out for the White Rose, and take her home to his breast for evermore. What a world this seemed suddenly to have become! How full of life and beauty everything had grown in the space of an hour! He could scarcely believe in the listlessness of yesterday, or realise the dull weight of sorrow he had carried for so many years that he was accustomed to its pressure, and only knew how grievous it had been now, when it was shaken off. He sat back in his arm-chair, absorbed in dreams of happiness. He felt so good, so considerate, so kindly, so thankful. How delightful, he thought, thus to be at peace with self, in favour with fortune, and in charity with all men!

His servant threw open the door and announced "Mr. Burton."

I suppose since the fall of our first parents there never was a Garden of Eden yet into which a serpent of some sort did not succeed in writhing himself soon or late,—never a

rose in which, if you did but examine closely, you might not find an insect, possibly an earwig, at the core.

Gerard, cheerfully and hospitably greeting his early visitor, little suspected how that gentleman was about to combine the amiable qualities of insect and reptile in his own person.

"Breakfasted!" replied the Dandy, in answer to his host's inquiry. "Hours ago! Been round the Park since that, and half-way to Kensington. Fact is, my good fellow, I'm restless, I'm anxious, I'm troubled in my mind, and it's about you!"

"About me!" said the other. "Don't distress yourself about me, Dandy. I've had a roughish time of it, as you know, but I'm in smooth water at last. If you won't eat, I'll have the things taken away."

While a servant was in the room, Burton preserved an admirable composure, enlarging pleasantly enough on those engrossing topics which make up the staple of everyday conversation. He touched on the political crisis, the new remedy for gout, the Two Thousand, the Derby, the Jockey Club, the Accordion, and the American actress of whom everybody was talking; while Gerard listened with a vague, happy smile, not attending to a syllable, as he pictured to himself the White Rose moving gracefully through her morning-room amongst her flowers, and wondered how early he could call without exciting remarks from the household, or outraging the decencies of society.

The moment the door closed, Burton's face assumed an expression of deep and friendly concern.

"Jerry," said he, "I didn't come here at early dawn only to tell you what the Man in the Street says. I've got something very particular to talk to you about. Only—honour!—it must go no farther than ourselves."

Since they left Archer's years ago, he had not called Ainslie by the familiar boyish nickname. The latter responded at once.

"Out with it, old fellow! Is it anything I can do for you?"

Burton became perfectly saint-like in his candour.

"You will be offended with me, I know," said he. "But a man ought not to shrink from doing his duty by him even at the risk of quarrelling with his friend. You and I are not mere acquaintances. If you saw me riding at a fence where you knew there was a gravel-pit on the other side, wouldn't you halloo to stop me?"

Gerard conceded that he certainly would bid him "hold hard," marvelling to what this touching metaphor tended the while.

"Jerry," continued his friend, with exceeding frankness, "I have reason to believe you are going to ride at a very blind place indeed. You shan't come to grief if I can help it!"

Ainslie laughed good-humouredly. "Show us the gravel-pit," said he. "I don't want to break my neck just yet, I can tell you."

"You won't like it," answered the other. "It's about Mrs. Vandeleur."

Gerard rose and took two turns through the room. Then he stopped opposite Burton's chair, and asked stiffly, almost fiercely,—"What about Mrs. Vandeleur? Mind, I have known that lady a good many years. No man alive, not the oldest friend I have, shall say anything disrespectful of her in my presence."

The Dandy began to think he didn't quite like his job, but he had resolved to go through with it.

"You make my task very difficult," said he; "and yet you must know it is only in your interest I speak at all. Sit down, Ainslie, and let me assure you that the subject cannot be more painful to you than it is to me."

Gerard sat down, took a paper-cutter from the writing-table, and began tapping it irritably against his teeth, while Burton watched him with about as much compunction as he might have felt for an oyster. He had no particular grudge against his old fellow-pupil, entertained no rabid sentiment of jealousy that the woman who had dismissed him so unceremoniously should be too favourably inclined towards the returned gold-digger,—but it was only through Gerard, as he believed, that he could crush the White Rose to the earth. Men have such different ways of showing their attachment. The kindly, gallant spirit, the stuff of which a really brave heart is made, can continue loyal even under defeat, can sacrifice its own happiness ungrudgingly to hers, whom it loves better than self, and while writhing in its acutest sufferings, can obey the first instinct of pluck, and say, "I am not hurt." But the cur, howling under punishment, turns fiercely on the once caressing hand, tears and worries at the heart it cannot make its own, cruel as cowardly, seeks or creates a hundred opportunities to inflict the pain it feels. Burton hated Mrs. Vandeleur with a hatred that sprang from pique, disappointment, and a sense of conscious unworthiness discovered by

one whom he had hoped to deceive. Therefore he determined to be revenged. Therefore he swore, in his own idiom, "to spoil her little game." Therefore he stuck at no baseness, however unmanly, to detach her from the one person in the world who could have made her happy. But effectually to work out his plans, it was necessary to be on good terms with the enemy. He had written many notes, wearied a score of common friends, and submitted to much humiliation with this object. Now he began to see the fruit ripening he had been at such charges to bring to maturity.

"It is not yet too late," said he, standing on the hearth-rug and gesticulating impressively with his umbrella, "for what I have to tell you. Had she been your wife, of course I must have held my tongue. Ainslie, the world says you are going to marry Mrs. Vandeleur. I don't ask you whether this is true; but you and I were boys together, and there is something you ought to know, which shall not be withheld by any foolish scruples of mine."

Gerard felt his very lips shake. There was more at stake here than wealth, honour, life, but he steadied himself bravely, and bade the other go on.

"You have cared for this woman a great many years, I fancy," continued Burton in grave, sympathising tones. "Believe me, from my soul I feel for you. But it is better you should be undeceived now than hereafter. Hang it! old fellow," he added, brightening up, "they're all so, you may depend upon it. There never was one born worth breaking your heart about."

With dry lips Gerard only answered, "You have told me nothing yet. Speak out, man. I'm not a child."

"She has made love to a great many fellows besides you, Jerry," said the Dandy. "Mind, I'm too old a bird to credit half or a quarter of the scandal I hear, but, at the same time, I cannot shut my eyes to what I see. Ask any man in London, if you don't believe me. You've not been in the world so much as I have; and besides, you're such a fierce, game sort of chap, people would be shy of telling you anything they thought you didn't like. It is only a true friend who dare take such liberties. I don't want to hurt your feelings. I don't want to blacken anybody's character; but, Jerry, indeed this lady is not fit to be your wife. You wouldn't like to marry a woman that's been talked about."

The paper-cutter broke short off in Ainslie's grasp.

"Blacken! Talked about!" he exclaimed furiously; then checking himself, added in a calmer tone, "I believe you

mean kindly, Burton, but you have proved nothing even now."

The latter opened his pocket-book, took from it three or four folded papers, smoothed them out methodically on the table, and observed—

"I suppose you know Mrs. Vandeleur's handwriting? Look at those!"

They were receipts of recent date for large sums of money, paid, as it would seem, by Burton to Mrs. Vandeleur's account, and represented, indeed, the withdrawal of certain investments he had made, during their pecuniary confederacy, on her behalf. Gerard opened his eyes wide, as also his mouth, but common sense had not yet quite deserted him, and he pushed the papers back, observing—

"I don't see what these have to do with the question. They refer, apparently, to some matter of business between—between Mrs. Vandeleur (he got the name out with difficulty) and yourself. It may or may not be a breach of confidence to show them, but—(and here he hesitated again)—but I don't suppose a man takes a receipt from a woman he cares for!"

"Confound the gold-digger!" thought Burton; "where did he get his knowledge of life?" He turned a franker face than ever on his friend, and searched once more in the pocket-book.

"You talk of breach of confidence," said he. "I am the last person in the world to betray a trust. But see the corner in which I am placed. Am I to keep faith with a woman to the destruction of my friend? Jerry, you are a man of honour. What would you do in my case?"

"I cannot advise you," answered the other in a faint voice, "and I cannot understand you. There seems to be something more to say. Let us get it over at once."

He could not have endured his torture much longer. He was ready now for the *coup de grace*. From an inner flap of the pocket-book Burton produced a note in a lady's handwriting, and tossed it to his friend. It had no envelope nor address, but there were Norah's free, bold characters; there was Norah's monogram. The very paper was peculiar to Norah, and the scent she had used from childhood seemed to cling faintly about its folds. Gerard was steady enough now, and nerved himself to read every word bravely, as he would have read his death-warrant. It was the note Mrs. Vandeleur had written long ago to Jane Tregunter, about a fancy ball, and which Burton had abstracted from her writing-

table. Every endearing term, every playful allusion, would equally have suited the hurried lines a lonely woman might send to the man she loved. The tears almost rose to his eyes while he thought what he would have given for such a production addressed to himself; but that was all over now. It had lasted for—how many years? Never mind. It was all over now. He folded the note carefully in its former creases, and returned it to Burton, observing, very gravely—

"You ought never to have shown such a letter as that to a living soul."

"You are the last man who should reproach me," retorted the Dandy, affecting to be much hurt, and feeling, indeed—such is the power of deception in the human mind—that his friend was not using him so well as he deserved! "Perhaps I might have valued it more had I not known the writer's character so well. It would have been the worse for you. Good-bye, Gerard. I never expected your gratitude, and I came here prepared to lose your friendship, but I don't care. I have done my duty, and some day you will confess you have judged me unfairly."

So the Dandy walked out with all the honours of injured innocence, and Gerard sat him down, with his head bowed in his hands, numbed and stupefied, wondering vaguely how such things could be. Never before, in any of his adventures, at any stage of his wanderings—in the crisis of danger, or the depth of privation—had he felt so utterly lost and desolate. Hitherto there had been at least a memory to console him. Now, even the Past was rubbed out, and with it everything was gone too. There was no hope left in life—no comfort to cheer—no prize to strive for—no guerdon to gain. The promise had vanished from the Future—the colour had faded out of nature—there was no more magic in the distance—no more warmth in the sunshine—no more glory in the day.

CHAPTER XLVIII

"HE COMETH NOT"

MAN, having the gift of reason, shows himself, where his affections are involved, perhaps the most unreasonable of living creatures. Corydon, offended with Phyllis, becomes, as far as she is concerned, a mere drivelling idiot, and a sulky one into the bargain. He may feed his bullocks, shear his sheep, plough his furrows, and thresh his wheat, with as much judgment as before their rupture, but nothing will persuade him to bring that good sense which he carries about over the farm, to bear on the reconciliation he desires. If he didn't plant them carefully in drills, would he expect huge turnips to rain from heaven into his ox-troughs? Wherefore, then, should he stand with his hands in his pockets, whistling a tune at the other end of the parish, when the object really next his heart is to carry the vixen off with him in a tax-cart to the fair? There is a certain element of self-conceit in the male animal, that he calls proper pride, forbidding him to tender the first advances, or even to meet his rustic beauty half-way, and the result of such egotistical stupidity is deep sorrow to her, much vexation to himself, possibly a continued rupture that leads to the eventual unhappiness of both. One tender word, even one kind look, in time, might have saved it all.

Men deal hard measure to those they love. The better they love them, the harder the measure. Perhaps there is no injustice more cruel than to make a woman answerable for the slanders of which she is the innocent and unconscious object, nay, of which, in some cases, the man who visits on her his own vexation is the original cause. She has been imprudent, it may be, for his sake. The world is not slow in discovering such follies, nor averse to exposing them; but it is hard that he for whom the risk was ventured should be the one to exact the penalty, that he, whose very hand has soiled the flower, should therefore leave it to droop and wither in the shade.

Gerard Ainslie, with a kindly nature and somewhat too sensitive a heart, had not one whit more of forbearance, not one grain more of good sense, than his neighbours. "Mrs. Vandeleur had been talked about—talked about!" This was what he kept on repeating to himself till he had chafed and irritated the wound to a festering sore; the pure and gentle spirit he had elevated into an ideal of womanly perfection, was, then, a mere creature of common clay like the rest. His idol, that he thought so far above him, had been dragged through the mire like other men's. His love was no longer spotless—there were stains on the petals of the White Rose! With masculine inconsistency, during those long years of sorrow and separation, he had never been jealous of her husband, like this! Talked about! Very likely they were laughing over his infatuation and sneering her fair fame away, at that very moment, in the clubs. Talked about! Perhaps even now some coxcomb was sitting by her in the well-known drawing-room, looking with bold insulting stare into those eyes of which his own could scarce sustain the lustre, plying her with the jargon of empty gallantry, nay, even making love to her, not unwelcome, in serious earnest!

And this was the woman so associated with the holiest and best part of his nature, that to him the very hem of her garment had been a sacred thing; yet all the while she must have been a pastime for half the men in London! A practised flirt; a mere faded coquette. Experienced, notorious, fast—good fun—and, talked about! He walked up and down the room till he felt half mad. He made a thousand resolutions, and dismissed them all as soon as formed. He would order his hack, ride off to her at once, and overwhelm her with reproaches. He would never enter her house, nor speak to her, nor even set eyes on her again. He would rush into society, and throw himself everywhere in her path, to cut her to the heart by the good-humoured condescension of his greeting, the placid indifference of his manner. He would leave England for ever, and go where there was nothing to remind him of the hateful bewitching presence, the dear accursed face! It rose on him, even while he thus resolved, in its pale thoughtful beauty, with the sweet sad smile, the deep, fond, haunting eyes, and then, I think, he tasted the very bitterest drop in the cup he had to drain.

These sorrows are none the less grievous while they last, because they are sickly, unreal, shadowy, sentimental. Gerard Ainslie was very miserable indeed, enduring just as much torture as he could bear, and all because a man, in whose

honesty he placed little confidence, of whose intellect he entertained but a mean opinion, had told him the woman he loved was talked about! Nevertheless, the only one of his resolutions to which he did adhere was the unwise determination to avoid Mrs. Vandeleur. He refused sundry invitations, threw over several engagements, and kept out of her way with studious persistency, till he made her almost as wretched as himself. The White Rose began by wondering why he did not come to see her, as was, indeed, natural enough, when she recalled the tenour of their last few interviews. He must have been summoned out of town, she thought, on sudden business, perhaps connected with herself; and this agreeable supposition caused her to wait with more patience than might have been expected; but when day after day passed by, and she kept her carriage standing at the door, in the vain hope that he might call before she went out, when hourly posts came in, and scores of notes in various shapes were delivered by footmen, commissioners, and messengers of every description, yet none arrived bearing a superscription in Gerard's handwriting, she began to feel nervous, depressed, and sick at heart. Then she took to going out of an evening to such balls, dinners, or other gatherings as she thought it possible he might attend, and found herself, as usual, a welcome guest. The smartest ladies in London considered Mrs. Vandeleur an additional ornament to the best-filled drawing-room; and amongst whole packs of cards ranged round the glass over her chimney-piece, she had only to select the invitations that pleased her best. She drove wearily round, therefore, from one to another of these crowded festivities, and each seemed more tiresome than its predecessor, because amongst all those vapid hundreds the only face she cared to look on escaped her still.

It is dreary work to assist at such amusements when the mind is ill at ease, the heart far away. Keenly and bitterly the happiness of others brings before us our own sorrow; and the very qualities of person and bearing we most admire, only remind us the more painfully of our own loved and lost, who would have shone so brightly here. The memory of the head is the most precious ingredient of human intellect, but surely it is wise to crush and stifle the memory of the heart. Mrs. Vandeleur thought more than once of consulting her staunch friend Dolly Egremont, but was deterred from this step by a variety of motives, amongst which that gentleman's continual employment at his theatre, and intense preoccupation about Miss Tregunter, were not the least urgent. She entertained,

besides, the instinctive delicacy that scares a woman from the subject dearest to her, despite the relief she feels it would be to share her burden with another. Had she met him in society it is probable that her reserve would have given way, and all her sorrows been poured freely out, but Dolly Egremont found no time now for such frivolities as dinner-parties, dances, or concerts. Every moment he could spare from the Accordion was devoted to reconciling his ladye-love to its exigencies, soothing her jealousy of the American actress lately arrived, and choosing costly articles for domestic use, shortly to become the property of both. So, after a deal of hesitation, and a certain petulant conviction that she could bear suspense no longer, Mrs. Vandeleur sat down to her writing-table, determined to hazard one frank, honest, and final appeal to her unaccountable lover by letter. How should she begin? She couldn't call him her "darling Gerard." It seemed so cold and formal to address him as "Dear Mr. Ainslie." She plunged into her task at once with a long line that reached right across the page.

"What has happened? How have I offended you? Why have you never been near me? Nay, why have you systematically avoided me almost since the day (it seems now to be years ago) that, I am not ashamed to confess, made me the happiest woman in London? I need not go into the past. Heaven knows you cannot have reproached me as I have reproached myself. Whatever sorrows I may have to endure I deserve richly, and at your hands. Perhaps this is why I am so humble now. Perhaps this is why I am prompted to write you a letter that you will condemn as forward, unwomanly, uncalled for. I cannot help it. I seem to have grown so reckless of late. Since I was quite a girl everything has gone against me, and I think I have nothing on earth to care for now. There are some things people can never forget. Oh, how I wish they could! There were a few months of my life, long ago—don't you remember them, Gerard?—in which I was really happy. How quickly they passed away, and yet I have no right to repine, for I have lived that dear time over and over again, so often since! If I were to tell you that my feelings have never altered since I was Norah Welby, keeping house for poor papa at Marston, you would not believe me, how could you? and you would have a right to despise me for the avowal. I don't deserve to be believed. I do deserve to be despised. I have been so vile, so heartless, so false, and oh, so foolish. No punishment that I suffer can be greater than I ought to expect. And yet, Gerard, I am so very miserable. I blame nobody. I am sure I have behaved wickedly by you, and it is quite right I should be the sufferer, but can we not be friends? Dear old friends, that's all. I have not too many, I assure you, and I prize the few I possess as they deserve. You need not shun me as if you hated my very sight. You were not at Lady Billesdon's last night, nor Mrs. Fulljam's the night before, nor at the Opera, and there was somebody I took for *you* in the stalls at the French play, but when he turned round it was a horrid man with an eye-glass. I was so disappointed I could have cried.

"Gerard, I am used to disappointments now, though I don't think practice makes me bear them one bit better. Do not give me another when I entreat you to let us meet once more; not here—I will never ask you to come here again, but anywhere, anywhere, in society—in the world—I only want to shake hands with you and know that I am forgiven. You will then feel that I am still, as always,—Your sincere friend, NORAH VANDELEUR."

This rather incoherent production the White Rose sealed and stamped with exceeding care, hiding it thereafter within the folds of her dress somewhere beneath her chin, and resolving, for greater security, to drop it in a pillar-post-box with her own hands, though why the ordinary means of transmission should not have served her on the present occasion I am at a loss to explain. I think I can understand the reason she ordered her brougham some hours earlier than usual, and sent it round to meet her, while, still carrying the letter next to her skin, she proceeded leisurely on foot to saunter through the quietest part of the Park, whence nevertheless, herself unnoticed, she could obtain a view of the Ride and the equestrians who frequented it for their morning gallops.

Of course, a personal interview with Gerard, especially if accidental, would be more dignified, and also more to the purpose than thus suing him *in formâ pauperis*, as it were, by letter. Moreover, while the fresh spring air cooled her brow, and the gay enlivening scene, of which she herself constituted one of the fairest objects, raised her spirits, she began to think she might have been premature in her alarm, overhasty in her conclusions. Supposing Gerard's secession was only accidental after all; supposing he was at that very moment hurrying back to town, or should even call at her house while she was out and receive her letter when he returned home, why, what would he think of her? How would he accept that last clause in it, tantamount to giving him up? Would he take her at her word? Not he! Surely, after all those years, he must love her still. The conviction stole into her senses like the soft spring air into her lungs, bringing with it warmth and vigour and vitality. If it was true, ought she not to punish him just a little for his late defection? She could not quite make up her mind about the letter. At last she determined to send it if she saw nothing of Gerard during her walk, feeling a vague sense of relief as though she had shifted responsibility from her own shoulders by thus wisely leaving the whole question to depend on the merest accident.

By this time she had unconsciously drawn nearer the Ride, and now her heart leaped into her mouth, for this was surely Mr. Ainslie galloping up on a bay horse discontented with his bridle. The cavalier gave her as much attention as he could spare in passing, but resembled Gerard as little as a stout, well-dyed, well-strapped, well-made-up elderly gentleman ever does resemble an able-bodied, athletic, weather-browned man in the prime of life. She scowled at him with bitter

hatred totally uncalled for, and rather hard upon a stranger, whose sole offence consisted in not being somebody else.

Two or three more disappointments, two or three hats flourished by men who knew that shapely figure well enough to recognise it at a hundred paces off, and Norah, with a heavy heart, and a certain weariness of gesture habitual to her when she was unhappy, bent her steps towards the gate at which she expected to find her carriage, resolving that, at least for to-day, her chance was over. If in town, surely on so fine a morning he would have been riding in the Park. Where could he be gone? The morning was not half so fine now. Well, she would post her letter, she thought, because she had told herself she would, and so drive sadly home, not to stir out again during the rest of the day.

CHAPTER XLIX

DOUBLE ACROSTICS

BUT Mrs. Vandeleur did not post her letter after all; certain unlooked-for circumstances, which will hereafter appear, having conspired to prevent this touching production ever reaching the hands for which it was intended. When the very box she meant to drop it into was cleared that morning, it disgorged a little note for Count Tourbillon, the delivery of which occasioned as much surprise as so imperturbable a gentleman was capable of feeling. It was short, couched in his own language, and written in a disguised hand, which might, as he told himself more than once, be the subterfuge of a lady, a lady's-maid, a bravo, a begging impostor—parbleu! even an assassin! It simply prayed him to render himself at a certain spot in Kensington Gardens, as near twelve o'clock as he conveniently could, where a person would be awaiting him; that person might easily be distinguished as holding the envelope of a letter in the left hand. The rendezvous, it must be well understood, was an affair, not of gallantry, but of business. It was to ask of the count an important favour; but one which, nevertheless, it was impossible he could refuse. Finally, the matter in question had nothing to do with love or money, and affected him in no way personally; therefore it implored him, as a true gentleman, not to disappoint the writer.

Count Tourbillon propped this little missive against his looking-glass, and studied it throughout the whole of his morning-toilet, continuing his reflections during the consumption of at least half a dozen cigarettes. Finally, arming himself with the indispensable umbrella, he sallied forth, resolved to penetrate this mystery, of which the most incomprehensible fold seemed to be that it depended in no way on his own attractions of appearance or conversation.

Few men have a sufficiently clear account with conscience to receive an anonymous letter unhaunted by some shadowy misgivings that one of their old half-forgotten iniquities has

overtaken them at last. *Raro antecedentem scelestum*, says Horace, as though he were actually quoting the scriptural warning, "Be sure your sin will find you out." A long impunity makes men very bold, but even the most audacious cannot divest themselves of a vague, uncomfortable foreboding, that though the sky be still bright, a cloud is even now behind the hill; though they are yet untouched, the Avenger is even now bending his bow in the thicket, his shaft perhaps already singing and quivering through the calm air towards its mark.

By preference, by temperament, by education, Tourbillon was *très-philosophe*, a free-thinker, a doubter, a casuist, an *esprit fort*, and a *viveur*. Turned loose at sixteen into high French society—the best school for manners, the worst for morals, in the world—he would have laughed to scorn any feeble-minded Mentor who should have propounded to him the possibility that pleasure might not be the *summum bonum* of existence; that on analysing the great *desideratum*, the mood we are all aiming at—call it happiness, self-approval, repose, comfort, what you will—a certain property named duty might be found to constitute four-fifths of the wished-for whole, and that perhaps the honest health and strength of a bargeman or a coal-porter might fill up the remainder. Tourbillon, I say, would have scorned such a moralist as a well-meaning imbecile, and bade him take his trash elsewhere, with a little less than his usual cold suavity of deportment, because that the man within the man could not but feel chafed and irritated by the horse-hair garment of Truth, wearing through the velvet folds of Falsehood and Self-indulgence with which he was enwrapped.

Few people owed a longer score for peccadilloes, vices, even crimes, than this pleasant, plausible Parisian; that he had not the guilt of murder on his soul was owing to the merest accident. It was no fault of his, as he told himself sometimes without a shudder, that he did not shoot Alphonse de Courcy through the head when they fought about a game of dominoes at Trieste: the Austrian officer who seconded him smoked as only Austrians can smoke, or his hand had been steadier than to shake those few extra grains of powder into the pistol, which caused it to throw an inch too high, and spoil De Courcy's hat instead of piercing that youth through the cavity in which he was supposed to keep his brains. Most of the other sins forbidden by the Decalogue, I fear, Tourbillon had committed without scruple. Perhaps he never bore false witness: certainly never stole; but, *en revanche*, all the rest of his duty towards his neighbour, and

especially towards his neighbour's wife, had been neglected and perverted from the day he first entered a *salon* in kid gloves and a tail-coat.

There are hundreds of such men about. Our own country is not without its share. People, good people, ask them to their houses, introduce them to their wives and daughters, shrug their shoulders when the antecedents of these guests are discussed, or observe forbearingly, "Wild, I fancy, formerly, and in one or two serious scrapes; but all that was abroad, you know, and one is justified in ignoring it. Besides, such an agreeable, well-informed fellow, and a thorough man of the world." There is a vast deal of charity, you see, amongst our fellow-creatures—both that which consists in the giving of alms, or rather dinners, to those who are not in need, and of that which covers or excuses a multitude of sins, provided always the sinners be agreeable people of the stronger sex. Let a woman—the victim, we will say, of one of these pleasant diners-out—who has been led by her softer nature into the commission of a single fault, throw herself on the mercy of this same generous, allowance-making society, and she will find she might as well have thrown herself from the roof of a London house on the area railings in the street below. "Arthur! Arthur! is there no forgiveness?" groaned remorseful Launcelot from the depths of his longing, wayward, false, yet generous heart, while he sat in his mailed saddle, an unwilling rebel to the lord he had so cruelly wronged, and still so dearly loved. Since that good knight—the flower of bravery—repented him too late, how many a tender voice has sent up the same despairing cry in vain! how many a lonely sorrowing woman, eager but to prove the sincerity of her repentance, has wailed in agony for forgiveness on earth, which will only be granted her in heaven!

Count Tourbillon, I need scarcely say, was the last person to distress himself either by regrets for the past or apprehension for the future. Swallowing a qualm or two, as certain visions of a boy who knew no harm, walking at his mother's side in the gardens of a château by the Garonne, rose to his mind's eye, and reflecting that he was as well able to pull through a difficulty, and hold his own now, as he had ever been in his life, the count amused himself by speculating on the approaching interview, wondering of what nature a rendezvous could possibly be, in which the object was avowedly neither love nor war—an appointment made neither by an admirer nor an adversary.

"It is droll," said he. "Let us reflect a little. My faith! it is of those things which break the head to think about."

He broke his head thinking about it, nevertheless, the whole way from Hyde Park Corner to the gate of Kensington Gardens. Each of the many faces he had loved and betrayed rose in succession to remind him of his vows, to reproach him with his perfidy, and, face by face, he dismissed them all without a sigh of pity, a twinge of remorse. He had not even the grace to wish he could undo the past, nor to persuade himself he would act differently if he had his time to come over again. Once only, amongst a score of others who had made a deeper impression on his fancy, he thought of Fanny Ainslie; but it was with a smile of amusement as he recalled her vivacious gestures, her quick temper, and her broken French.

Perhaps in all that phalanx of outraged beauty there might be one memory to avenge the cause of her injured sisters, one Donna Anna, that this French Giovanni could not quite forget, one lovely phantom to spoil his rest, like her who haunted the couch of false Sextus—

A woman fair and stately,
  But pale as are the dead,
Who through the watches of the night
  Sate spinning by his bed.

And as she plied the distaff,
  In a sweet voice and low,
She sang of great old houses,
  And fights fought long ago.

So spun she, and so sang she,
  Until the East was grey,
Then pointed to her bleeding heart,
  And shrieked, and fled away.

If so, he stifled her as resolutely as Othello, and with far less compunction. He bade her go back to her place of torment with the others; he could not attend to her now; he had newer matters on hand. Here he was, already at Kensington Gardens, and not a soul in sight but a gatekeeper in a long green coat and a hat with a gold-lace band. It was a sweet May morning; nowhere sweeter and pleasanter than in grassy, shady, cockney Kensington Gardens. Being a first assignation, at least for aught he knew to the contrary, the count was therefore a little before his time—just as he would have been for a duel. Also, as before a duel, he proceeded to while away the interval by smoking a cigar, enjoying the

warmth of the sunshine, the purity of the air, the freshness of the early verdure, as keenly as if he had been a combination of Wordsworth and Howard, poet and philanthropist. I cannot help thinking there are a certain proportion of men born without consciences at all. It is not that they commit sin; all of us do that; but their enormities seem to burden them neither with anxiety nor remorse. They do not fidget beforehand, they make no resolutions of amendment afterwards; they travel on the broad gauge, so to speak, in first-class carriages, with easy springs, cushioned seats, and a supreme indifference to their destination. They are more plentiful in France than in England, and Count Tourbillon was a very perfect specimen of the class.

Smoking, then, in placid content under a young horse-chestnut, he watched, with half-indulgent, half-cynical smiles, the usual business, amatory and otherwise, of this suburban resort waking into its daily life. The first figure to intrude on his solitude was a foot-guardsman carrying a clothes-basket, followed by a dingy-looking woman, talking, perhaps scolding, with considerable energy. The soldier plodded on inattentive, as one accustomed to the sounds. "Husband and wife!" said the count to his cigar, with a shrug of the shoulders. "My faith, how badly it seems always to arrange itself, even amongst the canaille. Hold, here is something more interesting!"

A very pretty girl, with all the outward appliances of wealth, all those subdued graces of gesture which seem only acquired by the constant habit of living in society, was walking by the side of an invalid-chair with the head up, and a man in livery pushing it behind. Her neat boots, her well-gloved hands, her golden *chignon*, her beads, her bracelets, her draperies, all were *point device*, and denoted not only birth and breeding, but enough of fashion to make the count wonder he did not know her by sight. She bent over the chair so affectionately, seemed so engrossed with its inmate, that Tourbillon felt positively interested, and moved several paces from his station for a nearer inspection of her companion; probably, he told himself, some handsome young lover disabled by a wound or an accident. Bah! the young lover was an old lady of fourscore, in a close bonnet and tortoise-shell spectacles, with trembling hands in long-fingered gloves, and a poor, shaking, palsied head, that turned like the sunflower to the bright young beauty, who was indeed the light of its declining day.

"There are illusions," said the count, replacing the cigar

he had taken respectfully from his lips, "and there must of consequence be disillusions to counteract them! Such is the equipoise of existence. I wish my doubtful correspondent would appear with the envelope in his, her, its, left hand. It seems I am here in faction, with but a vague prospect of relief. Patience, 'à la guerre, comme à la guerre!'"

Once more Tourbillon resigned himself to his vigil, which was getting rather wearisome, despite such interludes as a dripping water-dog shaking itself against his trousers, two little girls running their hoops simultaneously between his legs, and a petition from an incoherent slattern, apparently just out of an Asylum for Females of Weak Intellect, that he would be so good as to put her in the direct road to St. Pancras. He looked at his watch. It was scarcely twelve yet. He would make a little tour, he thought, to kill time, and so return to the appointed spot. He walked half a dozen paces, rounded the huge smoke-blackened stem of a great elm tree, and found himself, as he expressed it, "nose to nose" with Mr. Egremont. A bystander, had there been one, must have detected that the meeting was exceedingly *mal-à-propos*, they were so glad to see each other! Dolly, blushing violently, shook the count's hand as if he were the dearest friend in the world. "How was Tourbillon? He had not met him for ages. What had he been about? He had never thanked him enough for his kindness on a late occasion—and—had he been quite well since he saw him last?"

The count looked amused. Here was, indeed, something to kill time, not that he had any ill-nature about him, but that it was better fun to keep Dolly in a fidget than to smoke by himself till his correspondent arrived. That Dolly was in a fidget only became too obvious every moment. He glanced anxiously about, his colour went and came, he laughed nervously, and asked irrelevant questions without waiting for their answers. If the count suspected the truth it was cruel thus to prolong the torture, but like a fish unskilfully played, that at last, with one desperate effort, snaps your line and makes off to sea, Dolly, catching a glimpse of a well-known parasol, surmounting a well-known figure, broke from his tormentor with the courage of despair. He had persuaded Miss Tregunter, not without difficulty, to take an early walk with him in these pleasant retreats. They were engaged, but their engagement had not yet been given out, so they agreed to be abroad early, before the gossiping public were about. It never entered the calculations of either

that they would meet such a worldly spirit as Tourbillon in their new-found paradise.

A first *tête-à-tête* with the lady who has imposed on you a first pressure of her hand, a first avowal from her lips, and its ratification thereon, a first appointment to meet her, a first walk with her in Kew, Kensington, or any other Garden of Eden, is a thing to enjoy while it lasts, to remember softly and kindly when it has passed away, but certainly not to be curtailed nor interrupted by an unsympathising idler whom it requires only a little moral courage to shake off. Dolly, therefore, seeing the wished-for figure in the distance amongst the trees, looked his captor boldly in the face, masking any bashfulness he might feel with a certain quaintness of manner that was natural to him.

"I cannot stay now, count," said he, "not another moment. But I often come here, and will meet you if you like at the same time to-morrow."

"Ah! you come often here," repeated the count, laughing. "So do not I. Tell me then, Monsieur Egremont, what do you find so attractive in such a solitary place?"

"I come here to make double acrostics!" answered Dolly unblushingly. "They require undivided attention, and I can't do them if I am disturbed."

Tourbillon clapped him on the shoulder, laughing heartily. "Good!" said he, "mon brave! Success to your double acrostics. I shall not try to find out their answers. But, trust me, my friend, you will compose them all the better for a little assistance. Your English proverb says, you know, 'Two hearts, two heads,' what is it? 'are better than one!' I make you my compliments, and I leave you to find out its truth."

CHAPTER L

THE STAR OF THE WEST

TOURBILLON looked wistfully after the retreating couple as they disappeared amongst the trees. For a moment he could have envied Mr. Egremont and Miss Tregunter their open, above-board, and avowed attachment. Only for a moment, soon reflecting that such matters were quite out of his line, that he was totally unfitted for the flat sameness of domestic life, that the only sort of woman, half-devil, half-coquette, who could hope to interest him now, was the last he would wish to place beside him in his home, and that he was actually here at this spot but in accordance with that evil spirit which made novelty, mystery, and intrigue the daily bread of his existence.

A rather stout, showy-looking lady, dressed in black, came rapidly along the broad gravel walk, and when she approached the count, disclosed, as if purposely, the envelope of a letter in her left hand. The Frenchman's eye brightened, his languor vanished in an instant. The hawk in her swoop, the leopard in his lair, the wolf on the slot, every beast of prey wakes into energy when its quarry comes in sight. Tourbillon took his hat off without hesitation, and wished her good-morning, as if he had known her all his life.

"Madame has been most gracious in according me this interview," said he. "I have now to learn how I can be of service to madame."

He tried hard to see her face, but a couple of black veils drawn tight concealed the features as effectually as could any riding mask of the last century. His quick perceptions, however, took in at once that her figure was remarkably good, that she was exceedingly well dressed, and that the jewellery, of which she wore a good deal, though very magnificent, was in perfect taste. Her handkerchief too, and this with a gentleman of Tourbillon's experience counted for something, was trimmed with an edging of broad and delicate lace.

"A lady," thought the count, "no doubt. Not quite a *grande dame*, but still a person of position. Who can she be, and where can she have seen me before?"

He made no question, notwithstanding the protestations in her note, that this was a fresh conquest; assuming, therefore, his pleasantest manner and his sweetest smile; but the bright face clouded, the comely cheek turned white with the first tones of her voice, while she replied—

"I know Count Tourbillon well. I think he cannot have forgotten me. I am sure he will not deny that I have a right to ask of him any favour I please."

He could only gasp out, "Fanchon! Madame Enslee! Just Heaven! And I thought you were dead!"

"It would have made little difference to you if I had been," she answered, perfectly unmoved, but not without a touch of scorn. "It need make no difference to you now, count; I did not come here to talk about yourself, but about somebody whose boots you were never fit to black. I speak pretty plain. I've come from the side of the water where people say what they mean, and give it mouth too."

"You did not think so once," he broke in angrily; and then growing conscious that the position was false, even ridiculous, continued more temperately—"We all make mistakes, madame. This is a world of mistakes. I cannot see that it is the interest of either to injure the other. Circumstances conspired against us, but my feelings towards you have ever remained the same."

"I can easily believe it," she answered bitterly. "There was no love lost, count, you may take your oath. I told you that, pretty smart, in the letter I left on my dressing-table at Milan. You used to laugh at my French, but you understood every word of those six lines, I'll be bound. Short and sweet, wasn't it? And what I said then I mean now."

"Your French, like everything about you, was always charming," he replied gallantly. "Shall we sit down a little apart from the public walk? Your appearance, madame, is sufficiently attractive to command attention anywhere."

"I'm sure if I'm not ashamed of my company you needn't be," said the lady, moving to a less conspicuous spot, nevertheless, and lifting her double veil, that she might converse more freely. "I've not much to say, and I shouldn't care if the whole world saw you and me together; but I don't want to be overheard, all the same."

Just the old petulant, wilful, off-hand manner, he thought; the old self-scorn, the old want of tact, refinement, and good-

breeding. Looking into her face, too, he could still recognise much of the bright, comely beauty that had so captivated his fancy for a few weeks many years ago. It was coarser now, indeed; bolder, harder, and what people call overblown; but notwithstanding her life of change, sorrow, excitement, and adventure, the miller's daughter was a handsome, striking-looking woman even yet.

You have already learned by Tourbillon's exclamation of astonishment that it was no other than Fanny Draper, or rather Mrs. Ainslie, who thus sat by his side in Kensington Gardens, whom he had never seen since she left him in a fit of anger, disgust, and passionate repentance, some two months after her desertion of Gerard, and whose subsequent career—extending over a good many years—would itself have filled a three-volume novel, rich in scrapes, situations, ups-and-downs, success, disappointment, and retribution. Thrown on her own resources when she quitted the count at Milan, Fanny determined to return home at once and try her fortune on the English stage. It was a profession to which she was specially adapted by nature, and in which her mobility of feature and peculiar style of beauty afforded great advantages. She had not forgotten Mr. Bruff's flattering estimate of her histrionic powers, nor the lessons he had given her in the humble country-town, to which she even now looked back as to her one glimpse of paradise on earth. She avoided Ripley, and never went near her father, but plunged hastily into London, and, converting the few jewels she had brought with her into ready money, got an engagement to dance in a minor theatre at eighteen shillings a week, and so put her foot on the lowest round of a ladder in which the topmost seemed hopelessly out of reach. It was the old story. Fanny Draper — or Miss Douglas, as she called herself—was fortunate enough to hit that combination of three properties which alone ensures success; these are, confidence, ability, and opportunity. Of the two first she possessed more than her share, and the last she owed to the sudden illness of a dashing young lady with beautiful legs, who enacted the leading character in an extravaganza of which Fanny constituted a mere humble item in tights and spangles. Miss Douglas, on this fortunate occasion, advanced boldly to the rescue, accepted the part at an hour's notice, and was recognised as a star by the infallible criticism of a crowded gallery the moment she came to the footlights. Her legs were quite equal to the absentee's, her beauty infinitely superior, while her acting, as even the manager admitted,

really was something like acting, and he increased her salary forthwith. She left him, nevertheless, at the end of his season, for a far better engagement, and the following year saw her starring it in the country and making five or six pounds a week. A break then occurred in Miss Douglas's career until she appeared again, as a Mrs. St. Germyn, at Liverpool, to take her benefit on the eve of a Continental tour. Under different names she continued to perform at divers French theatres, in Russia, Prussia, and Austria, covering her deficiencies of accent and pronunciation with an *espièglerie* of manner that a foreign audience found irresistible, till, finally, being heard of as Madame Molinara, the great stage celebrity of New York, she was imported by indefatigable Dolly Egremont to retrieve a waning reputation and replenish an exhausted cash-box for his Accordion Theatre.

Madame Molinara had not passed through so many vicissitudes without adding good store of experience to the mother-wit, of which she enjoyed her full share, and she certainly did not put too low a price upon her talents. After a correspondence that nearly drove Dolly wild in its progress, and a stormy passage across the Atlantic highly conducive to health when it was over, behold the celebrated American actress, safely arrived in London, engaged at an exorbitant price to take the leading part in a melodrama written by the husband from whom she had been separated for more years than she liked to count.

"It is itself as good as a play," said she, after detailing, in as few words as possible, the above information for the benefit of the attentive count, who disappointed her, it must be admitted, by evincing so little surprise at the most startling points of her narrative. "They do say, Truth is stranger than Fiction; I'm sure, in my case, Romance whips Reality. And now to think of my sitting alongside of you, under an English elm. Dear, dear! what beautiful elms there was used to stand in the park at Oakover! Why, that loafer there with a spaniel dog might almost realise we were two lovers taking a spell of courting. Well, well! We've all been fools in our day; but live and learn is my motto! And now, count, what d'ye think made me write you that little note last night before I went to bed? Ah! you wouldn't guess from July to eternity. You're as sly as a 'possum: I know that of old; but I've fixed you there, I estimate. It's not often you get a Frenchman up a tree in what you was used to call—excuse my laughing—to call an affair of the heart."

Tourbillon was at a nonplus. What could she be driving

at, this hard, bold woman—with her hateful Americanisms and her loud, coarse mirth? He felt confused, puzzled, even a little ashamed, to be thus taken aback. As before an armed adversary he would have fallen "on guard" by instinct, so with a feminine foe he unconsciously assumed those tactics that came most natural to him in dealing with the gentler and subtler sex. He must make love to her, he thought, *de rigueur*; must warm up the sentiments, never very palatable, that had stood cold so long, and compound the best dish he could of the hash. She expected it, of course, or why was she there? With a practised glance from his bright black eyes, of which he knew the power as well as the most finished coquette who ever wore petticoats, he took his companion's hand and whispered softly—

"You wrote to me, Fanchon. Yes, I call you Fanchon to-day, as I have called you by that endearing name for years, in my sorrows, in my solitude, in my dreams. You sent for me because your heart, like mine, cannot quite forget. Because, like mine, it pines to resume once more the only true affection it has ever known. Because, in fine, we return after all our wanderings to our first attachments; and—and—though you would not trust your address to the chances of a letter, you will confide it to me now, and we shall speedily meet again."

She laughed once more; heartily this time, and with such real enjoyment as convinced even Tourbillon's vanity that, whatever motives led her to seek this interview, affection for himself had nothing to do with them.

"You whip creation, count!" she said, wiping her eyes with the richly laced handkerchief. "You do, indeed! Such cheek as yours was never so much as heard of out of Paris. You carry on with so good a face too! Solemn enough to stop a clock! They spoiled a second Liston when they made you an attaché, or an ambassador, or whatever you are. I don't know whether you've done well in your own profession, but I'm availed you'd get along considerable in mine. Now, if you'll stow all that gammon and speak common sense for three minutes, I'll tell you my mind right away, and then make tracks. That ugly chap in a gold-laced hat has been looking our way till I'm tired of him. Listen, count. This is something to your advantage!"

"You were always heartless," replied Tourbillon in perfect good-humour. "It's my misfortune. Speak, madame; I am all attention."

"Now that's business," said the lady approvingly. "I

suppose, monsieur, you won't deny that I know two or three things you'd just as soon I kept to myself."

He shrugged his shoulders carelessly, but with an affirmative gesture.

"Very well," she continued. "Now, if you'll keep my secrets, I'll keep yours. Is it a bargain?"

"Honour!" said the count, with a smile.

"Honour!" she repeated. "Ah! but is it honour as if I were a *man* and could call you to account? No. Don't get riled. I'm aware you'd make no bones about that! But is it honour such as you would pledge to another *gentleman* (she put a bitter emphasis on the word) like yourself?"

"Honour, madame!" he answered gravely, "as between man and man. On both sides!"

She seemed satisfied.

"Then to such honour I trust," said she, "that you will not betray me. That you will never recognise nor salute me in public, never divulge in private that the Madame Molinara of the play-bills owns a legal right to but one of all the names she has been called by, and that name she disgraced, not for your sake, you needn't think it! but because—well, never mind why. Perhaps because she had a wild fierce temper and a loving heart! You may sneer, count,—you often used, I remember,—but I tell you, there is but one man in the world I'd walk fifty yards to serve, and that man was once my husband. Once!—he's my husband still. Let me see who dare dispute it! But I'll never stand in his way, poor Gerard; I'll never be a clog and a blot, and a disgrace to *him*. If he fancies I'm dead and gone, perhaps he'll think kindly of me now and then, who knows? We didn't hit it off so bad together just at first. It seems queer enough to remember it all now. Don't be afraid, count; I'm not going to cry, but I can't keep from laughing. It's enough to make a cat laugh. Madame Molinara don't sound much like Fanny Draper, does it? Nor I don't look much like her neither—do I? There's but two people left in England I'm afraid of now that poor father's dead and gone, and me never to have seen him! But two in all England, count, and you're one of them."

Tourbillon bowed, as accepting a compliment, adding—

"And Monsieur Ainslie, without doubt, is the other?"

"Gerard!" she exclaimed, with another laugh, which stifled something like a sob. "Not he! Not if he was coming up the walk here, this instant. And dressed for the stage, bless you! Why, he wouldn't know me from his grandmother. No, I can keep out of the other's way. She and I are little likely

to meet in this great crowded town; but I own I was afraid of you. I remembered your ways of old. I knew that if you heard of a fresh face, be she princess, actress, or chimney-sweep, you'd never rest till you'd seen her, and found out all about her, and made love to her, maybe, as you always do. That's why I've asked you to meet me here. That's why I've asked you to promise you will never let Mr. Ainslie nor anybody else know I'm alive and in England. Now, count, can I depend upon you?"

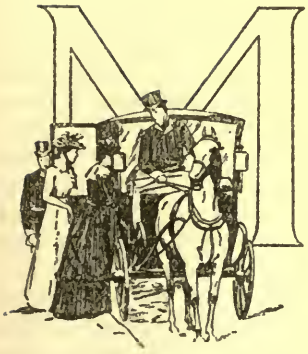
"It is a bargain," said Tourbillon impressively; "on one side as on the other!"

"Done!" she answered, shaking hands as if to ratify the compact, while she wished him good-bye. "I shall perhaps have one more look at him now. He'll never be the wiser. Of the other I have no fear—no fear. She's a real lady, and I—well, I'm an actress. Nothing better. I thank you, Tourbillon; I do indeed! Good luck to you! From my heart I wish you well!"

So she walked out of the garden, staring superciliously on the unoffending guardian of the gate, while the count, selecting his largest cigar, proceeded to light it thoughtfully and methodically, looking after his late companion with an air of whimsical consternation on his expressive countenance that language is powerless to describe.

CHAPTER LI

"FAIS CE QUE DOIS"



MADAME MOLINARA, or Fanny as we may again call her, had confessed to the count that, besides himself, there was but one person in London from whom she feared recognition, but one whom she dreaded to meet. Her feminine instincts warned her that if she should chance to come face to face with Mrs. Vandeleur, all attempt at further concealment would be in vain. The spirit of rivalry between women is far keener, subtler, more enduring than with men. The miller's daughter had loved Gerard Ainslie as dearly as it was in such a nature to love any human being, and was ready to prove her affection by voluntarily relinquishing every claim on her husband. She felt she could never make him happy; felt it now just as surely, though not so bitterly, as in the first days of their married life. She had resolved, and in such a woman there was no small self-sacrifice in the resolution, that she would be contented but to hear that he was beloved by somebody more worthy of him. That should he choose to believe her dead (remember, Fanny's standard of morality was only in accordance with her education and her subsequent career), she would never undeceive him; trying to rejoice from her heart if she learned he was married to another—just as she had rejoiced when she read in the English newspapers of his succession to wealth that she never dreamed of asking him to share. To be sure, her profession brought her in more money than she could spend; but had she been penniless, she felt it would have made no difference. With all her faults she was, in some respects, a thorough woman: in none more so

than in certain overstrained sentiments of false pride and real generosity. True, she could have approved of Gerard's marriage to any other on earth rather than to Mrs. Vandeleur. Thousands of miles off a pang smote her when she saw in the *Times* how that lady had at last become a widow. But while her heart insisted Gerard would never care for anybody but Norah, her head reasoned more coldly and rationally, that few attachments were rooted deep enough to withstand such contrary blasts as had swept over the White Rose, to outlive so long a frost as must have chilled and pierced her to the core. "No," she told herself, walking hastily homeward through the Park. "If they had been going to make a match of it they would have settled matters months ago. John Vandeleur's been dead long enough, in all conscience. My! what a wicked one he was! I wonder what's gone with him now! Well, it's no use bothering about that! I daresay Miss Norah's pretty much altered, too, by this time. I know I am, though the Yankees didn't seem to think there was a deal amiss with my outside neither! What will happen to my Gerard is this. Some young lady of title will fall in love with him, and they'll be married with two parsons and a dozen of bridesmaids, and I'll put on a thick veil and go up in the gallery to see it done. Suppose she didn't suit him after all. That won't do at any price. No, we'll fix it different for his sake, though it's as bad as bitters to swallow down. If he must have the woman he set his foolish boy's heart on, why he shall. I'll give him up to her, I will. 'Specially if she's gone off in her looks! I shall never know it, though. I mustn't meet her. It's my business to keep out of her way if I go barefoot a hundred miles. Jerusalem! If this isn't Miss Welby herself!"

Fanny had, indeed, bounced into the very arms of a lady making for a brougham waiting some twenty paces off, in the carriage-drive, whom she knew at once for Mrs. Vandeleur, and whom, in the confusion of the moment, she called out loud by her maiden-name. The recognition was instantaneous and mutual. Norah, turning as white as a sheet, felt ready to drop. With both hands she clung to the railing that guarded the footway, and strove to frame some common-place words of greeting and surprise. In vain, for not a syllable would come.

Fanny recovered her senses first; more accustomed to situations of perplexity, she had acquired the useful habit of taking the bull by the horns, and she saw with a glance that the present was no time for deception or concealment.

"Norah, turning white as a sheet, felt ready to drop."

Acting always on impulse, it was her impulse at this moment to be frank, generous, and outspoken. She, the woman who had right and power on her side, threw herself without hesitation on the mercy of the other.

"Miss Norah!" said she. "Miss Welby—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Vandeleur. It's too late; you knew me; I saw you did. You was always a good friend to me and mine long ago. Be a good friend still. Will you keep my secret and his?"

"Your secret! His!" gasped Norah, still holding on to the rails. "Fanny—Mrs. Ainslie—what do you mean?"

The other had quite recovered her coolness now.

"Is that your carriage, ma'am?" said she, pointing to the brougham, with its two servants assiduously preparing for their mistress. "Will you give me a lift? I've something to say that can't be said out here amongst all these people. Oh! you needn't be afraid! I keep a carraige of my own now!"

This was unjust, for Mrs. Vandeleur, though she had not yet recovered her voice, expressed in dumb show exceeding goodwill thus to remove their unexpected interview from public gaze; but Fanny was prepared to be unjust, because with one comprehensive glance that took in the other's features, complexion, bonnet, earrings, gloves, dress, and deportment, the uncomfortable truth obtruded itself, that never even in her bright young days long ago had the White Rose, spite of anxiety and agitation, looked more queenly, more delicate, more beautiful, than at that moment.

It was a hard task Madame Molinara had set herself, but she resolved to go through it, reflecting with something of bitter sarcasm that, had she known beforehand her rival's beauty remained so untarnished, she would never have drifted into the false position that bade her do an act of generosity against her will.

Not till the door of the carriage was banged to, and the direction given for Fanny's residence, did Mrs. Vandeleur find her voice. It came at last, very weak and tremulous—

"I was so startled just now, I could not tell you, but I am glad to see you again, Fanny. Indeed I am."

"That's nonsense," answered Fanny, with good-humoured abruptness. "You oughtn't to be. You ought to hate me. You do. Just as I used to hate you. But you won't hate me any longer when I've told you all I want to say. What a noise these small broughams make, to be sure. One can't hear oneself speak. I suppose it's being so near the wheels."

Mrs. Vandeleur could hardly help smiling at this display of a fastidious taste in carriages from the miller's daughter. Perhaps the other made the remark on purpose, intending thereby to place them both on a more common-place and more equal footing; perhaps only with the nervous desire, natural to us all, of putting off, if for ever so few seconds, the fatal word or deed that must henceforth be irrevocable, irretrievable. There was silence for a few seconds between the two women, while each, scanning the other's exterior, wondered what Gerard could see to excuse his infatuation, but with this difference, that Mrs. Vandeleur marvelled honestly and from her heart, whereas the actress forced herself to stifle the conviction of her own inferiority in all, except mere physical attraction, that fascinated mankind. She broke it abruptly, and with an effort.

"Miss Norah," said she. "Mrs. Vandeleur, do you think as bad people can ever be happy? Not if they're ever so prosperous! Don't believe it. I've been wicked enough myself, and now I'm so miserable—so miserable!"

Her voice came thick and dry, while the lines that denote mental suffering deepened and hardened round her mouth. The comely face looked ten years older than when it smiled mockingly on Tourbillon half an hour ago. Norah took her hand.

"Nobody is too wicked," said she gently, "to repent and to make amends."

"Repent!" echoed Fanny, almost in tones of anger; "I can't repent, I tell you. I'd do just the same if it was to come over again. But I can make amends, and I will too. Oh, Mrs. Vandeleur! you'll hate me, you'll despise me, you'll never forgive me when you know all! No more you ought not. I'll never forgive myself. And yet I'm not sorry for it really in my heart. I'm not. You cannot understand how I was tempted. You'd been used to gentlefolks all your life. To you, he was just one amongst a lot of others. But to me, he seemed like an angel out of heaven. Ay, the first time as ever I set eyes on him, walking through the fields, and watching of the May-fly on poor old Ripley Water, I loved him so—I loved him so!"

"Loved him!" thought Norah, "and yet she could leave him for years, when she had a right to be near him. Ah! if I'd been in her place, I'd have followed my darling through the wide world, whether he liked it or not." But she felt that, after all, this woman was his wedded wife, while she—well, she had no right to speak, so she held her peace.

"Then I determined," continued Fanny in a set, firm voice. "Yes, I swore that, come what might, I'd have him, if I died for it. I wasn't a good girl like you, Miss Norah. I wasn't brought up to be a good girl, though poor old daddy he was always the kindest of fathers to me. And I hadn't set foot in England two days afore I was down at Ripley, and through the orchard like a lapwing, making no doubt as I should find him with his arm over the half-door, and his dear old face, that's in heaven now, smiling through the flour, so pleased to see his little Fan. I ain't going to cry, Mrs. Vandeleur. Well, when I came round in front, the place was all shut up and boarded in. The garden-plot was choked in nettles, the box had grown as high as my knees, the mill-wheel was stopped, and the sluice dry. I cried then, I did, for I knew I should never see him no more. It's a quiet little place they've buried him in. Close by mother, in a corner of Ripley churchyard. Oh, Mrs. Vandeleur! d'ye think he could have died without knowing as his little Fan would have given her two eyes to be at his bed-head only for a minute? I can't bear to think of it. I won't! I can't! I ain't going to cry. I ain't going to cry."

But she did cry, heartily, bursting into a passion of tears as violent as it was soon over, while Mrs. Vandeleur, woman-like, wept a little, no doubt, for company.

"You've a good heart, you have," resumed the miller's daughter, "and that's why I'm so sorry and so resolute. Look here, Mrs. Vandeleur; I stole away the man you loved, and—yes, I will say it out—as loved you, and made him my husband. There was others in the business far more to blame than me. Others as stuck at nothing to get what they wanted, be it good or bad; but that's all past and gone now. Well, I know if right had been right, you should have had my Gerard (Norah winced and shrank back into her corner of the carriage), and you shall have him yet. Repent and make amends, says you. I can't repent, but I can make amends. Nobody but yourself and one other knows I'm in England, or even alive. I'll engage that one doesn't let the cat out of the bag. Besides, I've heard say that if a woman keeps seven years away from her husband, she's as good as dead to him in law, and he can marry again. You two might be very happy together. I don't want to see it; but I can bear to know it, if it's my own doing. There, I've said my say, and here we are turning into Berners Street."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Norah, struggling fiercely, as it were, with the evil spirit that was tempting her, radiant and

seductive as an angel of light. "Impossible, Fanny! You mean kindly, generously, no doubt. But your marriage to—to Mr. Ainslie is lawful and binding so long as you both live. Nothing on earth can undo it. Besides, think of the scandal—the shame—the sin!"

"Oh, I don't go in for all that," answered Fanny, a little relieved, it may be, in her secret heart, by the rejection of her handsome offer. "I've got other things to think of. I can't sit with my hands before me, working it backwards and forwards like you ladies do. I've my own bread to make, you see, and very good bread it is, I can tell you. Why, I've a part to study now, this very afternoon. And father isn't hardly cold in his grave," she added, with a strange, ghastly smile.

"A part to study!" repeated Norah. "Oh, Fanny—you never will—you never can!"

"Folks must live," answered the other, with the hard, bold expression that had varied so often during their drive, settling over her face once more.

They had now reached Madame Molinara's door in Berners Street, and the brougham came to a stop.

"Fanny!" exclaimed Mrs. Vandeleur, "you mean to do right. You want to be better. We are both very miserable, I—I have more than I need of this world's wealth. Share it with me. Leave the stage, and try to lead a different life. It is better, after all, to be good; than famous, admired, successful—even happy."

"I should go mad!" answered the other wildly. "I should go thinking, thinking, thinking, till I was out of my mind. Nothing but the constant excitement keeps me in my senses. Come and see me act. Promise; I shall feel a better woman. Mrs. Vandeleur, you are an angel! If I dared, I would say, 'God bless you!'"

She seized the corner of Norah's shawl, pressed it passionately once, twice, to her lips, darted from the carriage, and drawing both veils over her face, hurried across the street to disappear within her own door.

"Home!" said the White Rose, leaning back in solitude, and realising, for the first time, her utter desolation—the bitter loneliness of her lot, the cruel mockery of a life, rich in empty appliances of outward show, but deprived of sympathy, debarred from happiness, and devoid of hope.

CHAPTER LII

"ADVIENNE CE QUE POURRA"

IT is a well-known truth, borne out by the moral and physical experience of every sufferer, that the severity of a wound or blow is not thoroughly appreciated till its immediate effects have passed away. A man breaks his collar-bone hunting, receives a sabre cut, or even loses a limb, in action, and for a while, beyond a certain numbness and confusion, is scarcely aware that he has been hurt. So is it with a great sorrow. There is, first of all, an instinctive effort at resistance, not without something of the hard, stern joy brave spirits feel in every phase of strife, followed by a dead sensation of stupefaction and bewilderment, the lull, as it were, before the storm; then, after a dark, strange, ghastly interval, a smarting pain, a piercing agony, the real punishment which wrings those most severely who clench their teeth, and knit their brows, and scorn to wince, or shrink, or cry aloud beneath the torture.

Norah looked very pale and stern when she walked into her own house; but she had quite made up her mind what she was going to do. With her head up, and a proud, resolute step, like some priestess of old, prepared to officiate at the sacrifice, she marched into her drawing-room—that room in which every article of furniture, every ornament and knick-knack, was now more or less associated with his presence, and proceeded to ransack a little drawer in her writing-table, sacred to certain relics that had somehow connected themselves with Mr. Ainslie. These treasures were but few in number, and, to judge by appearance, of small intrinsic value; yet what a life's history they represented; what a wealth of affection, anxiety, longing, folly, and regret had been lavished on those poor, desultory, unconscious trifles! There lay the book he had given her long ago, in the days of annuals and keepsakes, at Marston Rectory. A gaudy little volume, bound in much-frayed red and gold. Its contents, I am bound to admit, were of the trashiest and most nonsensical character.

An engraving of an impossible woman in drooping ringlets, with an enormous straw hat, adorned the frontispiece, and to this deity such touching lines as the following, separated by a sheet of silver paper from their object, were addressed in ostentatious type :—

> Lady, I look and wonder at thy face,
> Its perfect lineaments, its haughty grace ;
> The fair pale brow, the calm and classic smile,
> The deep dark eyes, that brighten and beguile.

And so on, through some fifty verses, scored along the margin by a black-lead pencil, doubtless young Gerard's handiwork during intervals of deeper study at Mr. Archer's, and intended to convey his favourable criticism of the poetry, his entire concurrence in its tone of adoration, as applied to the young lady for whom he brought such works across the Marshes in his pocket. Ah, those well-remembered Marshes! She could see them now, with their wide, straight ditches gleaming in the summer sun, as she drove her ponies merrily across the level, looking here and there for the light, graceful figure that seldom disappointed her. Could it have been so long ago? and was it all over—all over now? She pushed the book back into its drawer, and for a moment felt she had neither strength nor courage to make an end of her task, but, calling to mind the late interview with Fanny, nerved herself once more for her trial, and put this keepsake aside, to pack up with the rest. She had preserved it through her whole married life, and his, but to-day it must go once for all.

There was a dried flower, too, of what kind, in its then state of atrophy, it would have puzzled a botanist to decide ; but Gerard had worn it in his coat that time when she saw him again after all those years of absence. Somehow it got detached, and had fallen out. She picked it off the carpet when he went away, and for a little kept it in a very warm place, which might account perhaps for its being so completely withered, before she hid it up with the other things in their drawer. Must that go too? Well, it was better it should ; if she spared one, she might spare all, and right was right. She must not even *think* of Mrs. Ainslie's lawful husband any more!

Here was a note—a note in the dear familiar hand. It began formally enough, and might, indeed, have been published word for word in the *Times* newspaper, containing as it did a very practical intimation that the writer had secured stalls for herself and Miss Tregunter at the French

play. How well she remembered the vouchers coming from Mitchell's in their envelope, and the glee with which she put them in the fire! They didn't go near the French play after all. Not one of them cared in their hearts if they never entered a theatre again. No; far better than that, they all dined at deaf, kind old Lady Baker's. Herself and Somebody, and Jane and Dolly Egremont, with a couple of pleasant Guardsmen, not particularly in love, to do the talking. Somebody took her down to dinner, and there was music afterwards, under cover of which certain whispers, meaning more than they expressed, passed unnoticed. Then, when it was time to go away, Somebody put her into her carriage, retaining, as his guerdon, the flower she had worn all the evening in her bosom, and pressed it fondly to his lips (she saw him by the light of her own carriage-lamps) as she drove away. Altogether it was an evening out of Paradise, and now there were to be no more of them. No more—no more.

The poor withered flower was drafted accordingly, to accompany the other discarded mementoes of an affection that should have been broken off long ago, if it was to be destroyed at all. You may tear up a sapling with your hand, and Mother Earth, Dame Nature, whatever you please to call her, covers the gap over so effectually in six months, you would never guess she had sustained the slightest abrasion. But let your young tree grow for a few seasons, expanding to the sunshine, drinking in the rain, drawing sustenance and vitality from the very atmosphere, you must use cord, and lever, and grappling-iron, if you would displace it now. It is a question of strength, I admit, and you may root it up by main force like the other; but how long will it be before the grass grows over the place again? It must remain seamed, scarred, bare, and barren for the best part of a lifetime.

There was scarcely anything more to put away. A card he left with a few lines in pencil, expressing disappointment not to find her at home. A quill he had stripped of its feather clumsily enough, sitting in the very chair yonder by the window, while he laid his ground-plan several feet above the surface, for one of those "castles in the air" he was never tired of building and furnishing to make a future habitation. Alas! she must not hope to enter it now. Perhaps, and the tears hung thick upon her eyelashes, she might occupy it with him hereafter, as one of the many mansions promised to the houseless ones in heaven.

The drawer was nearly empty. Nothing remained but a

showy dog-collar of red morocco leather, with a little silver bell attached. Talking nonsense, as women will sometimes, and men too, when they are very happy, she had once threatened to have a watch-dog for her drawing-room, weighing perhaps three pounds and a half, the smallest, she boasted, that could be got in London. Of course Gerard went in quest of such a toy the following morning, but pending his difficulties in procuring anything so small as she desired, zealously effected so much of his task as consisted in purchasing a collar and sending it home forthwith. To Bill George, and other gentlemen of the Fancy in the same line, the period that had since elapsed afforded but a short space for their requisite inquiries and negotiations. Alas! that it seemed as if years had passed away in the interim to the White Rose!

By what process of feminine reasoning she arrived at her conclusion, it is not for me to explain, but though she discarded the collar, Norah felt herself justified in retaining the bell. This morsel of silver she fastened carefully to her watch-chain, then heaping the rest of the spoil together, packed it up very neatly, stuck half a dozen stamps on it, addressed the whole to Gerard Ainslie, Esq., in a firmer hand than common, and so sat down to cry. Do not judge her harshly. She was trying to do right, you see, and we all know, at least all who have ever turned their faces resolutely to the task, how steep and rugged is the upward path, how sharp its flints, how merciless its thorns, how grim and grey and desolate frowns that ridge of granite, to attain which all these efforts must be made, all these sufferings endured. It is not easy to be good. Never believe it, or why should Virtue win at last so lavish, so priceless a reward! Excelsior! Fight on, fight upwards; though heart sink, limbs fail, brain reel, and eyes be dimmed with tears of anguish, fight doggedly on! From that stern grey ridge you shall see the promised land, the golden mountains, and the narrow path, growing easier every step, that leads across the valley direct to the gates of heaven.

A woman is very much in earnest when she forgets her luncheon. Robert Smart, who considered himself essentially Mrs. Vandeleur's footman, and looked on his fellow-servant in the same livery as a mere rear-rank man, a sort of make-weight and set-off to his own gorgeous presence, was accustomed at this period of the day, as indeed at many others, when he could find excuse, to ring a handbell with exceeding perseverance and energy. He seemed to think it

becoming that next door neighbours on both sides, and as much as possible of the street, should be advised whenever his mistress was about to partake of solid refreshment. On the present occasion, having laid his table gravely and decorously as usual, he applied himself with vigour to the luncheon-bell, and felt a little surprised to find that summons unattended by its usual result.

Robert, whose general appearance was of a kind much appreciated below-stairs, affected the best of terms with the cook. That worthy woman, "keeping company," as she expressed it, with nobody in particular at the time, regarded him with sufficient approval. His attractions came out, indeed, in shining contrast with a baker whom she had lately jilted, and a desirable greengrocer whose attentions she already perceived looming in the distance.

Such a state of affairs was peculiarly favourable to domestic criticism on "the missis," her "sperrits," her "tantrums," her loss of appetite, and her "followers."

The bell had been rung more than ten minutes, and still no opening of doors, no rustle of draperies on the staircase, announced that Mrs. Vandeleur had gone down to luncheon. The cutlets would be cold, the grill uneatable, the new potatoes steamed to a consistency like soap. Already a "*soufflé* to follow" was at the very bubble of perfection. The cook lost patience. "Bob," she screamed from the foot of her kitchen-stairs, "whatever are you about up there, and why don't you bring down the first course?"

Bob, as she called him, was tugging at his wristbands in the dining-room, but responded forthwith.

"She've never come to lunch at all," said he, looking disgusted at such transparent want of common sense. "She've not been above-stairs, or I must have heard her go. She've never left the drawing-room, and the things is all getting cold, and the carriage ordered at three to a moment."

The cook prided herself on an uncomplimentary abruptness, calling it "speaking her mind."

"Well," she replied, "you great gaby, why don't you ring the luncheon-bell again? If that didn't fetch her down, I'd go bold into the drawing-room and tell her myself, if it was me."

"No, you wouldn't," replied Mr. Smart, from the top step of the kitchen-stairs. "She've given orders not to be disturbed in that there room. I wouldn't go in for ninepence, not without I'd a reasonable excuse."

"Bother her orders!" replied the cook, insubordinate as it were *ex officio*; "she could but blow up like another."

"Missis never blows up," answered Robert,—"I wish she would; but she've a way of looking at a chap when she ain't best pleased, as if he was the dirt beneath her feet. I don't like it, I tell ye; I ain't used to it."

"Ah, you've been spoilt, you have!" observed the cook, casting an anxious glance towards the kitchen and the *soufflé*.

"'Specially by the women-folk," retorted Mr. Smart, with his best air.

"Get along with ye," laughed the other, retiring leisurely to the glowing recesses of her own dominions.

Fortunately for Robert's peace of mind a ring at the door-bell, and delivery of a note by the postman, furnished sufficient excuse for intrusion in the drawing-room. He returned from that apartment wearing a face of considerable importance, and proceeded to afford his fellow-servant the benefit of his experience.

"There's something up," observed he, with an air of great sagacity. "It's no wonder the luncheon's been left to get cold. There's missis walking about the drawing-room taking on awful. I handed the note on a waiter as usual, and she stood looking out-a-winder, and never turned round to take it nor nothing. 'Thank you, James,' says she, for she didn't even know my step from his'n, 'put it down on the writing-table.' 'Luncheon's ready, ma'am,' says I. 'I don't want no luncheon,' says she, but I could tell by her voice she'd been cryin', cryin' fit to bust herself. I wish I knowed wot it was; I can't a-bear to see her so down for nothin'. It's a bad job, you may depend. I wish it mayn't be a death in the family."

"I wish it mayn't be old Van come back again," retorted the cook, who was of a less impressionable, and, indeed, more scoffing disposition. "She wouldn't like to be a widow bewitched, I know!"

"It's a bad job," repeated Mr. Smart, feeling, to do him justice, somewhat concerned for the obvious distress of the lady whose bread he ate—five times a day.

The cook laughed. "Look ye here," said she. "I can see into a mill-stone as far as another. That chap with a brown beard hasn't been in our house for a fortnight, has he now? Nor he hasn't left his card neither, for I've been and looked in the basket myself every day. I mean him as was away foreign so long. Well, they do say as he kept company with missis afore she was married, or anything, and that's what brought him here day after day, at all hours, whether or no. And now he never comes near her, nor nothing.

Don't you see, you great stupe? She've been and lost her young man. That's why she takes on! Don't you trouble —she'll soon get another. Dear, dear—you men! what a thick-headed lot you are! And there's my stock draining away to rubbish all the while!"

So you see that Norah's distresses, however touching and highflown they may have appeared to herself, were susceptible of a broader, lower, more common-place view, when thus subjected to the impartial comments and criticism of her own servants in her own house.

CHAPTER LIII

HUNTING HER DOWN

MRS. VANDELEUR dried her tears, and read the note humbly enough. She knew the handwriting to be Burton's, and at another time would have accepted such a communication with something of impatience, if not scorn. It was her worst symptom, she thought, that she should feel too weary and wretched to-day to be angry with anything. Though rather a crafty production, and though her thoughts wandered so heedlessly to other matters, that it was not till the second perusal she gathered its real meaning and object, there was nothing in the following appeal to her own sense of justice which did not seem perfectly fair and above-board.

"DEAR MRS. VANDELEUR,—Under existing circumstances, and after our unfortunate misunderstanding, you will be surprised to see my signature to a note, or rather a letter (for I have much to explain), addressed to yourself. Surprised, but, may I venture to hope, not offended? Indeed, you have no cause for offence. None can regret more deeply than myself the chain of untoward accidents that have conspired to lower me in your opinion, nor the consequent estrangement of a lady whose esteem I value exceedingly, and whom I was formerly permitted to consider one of my oldest and kindest friends. Whatever hopes I may have cherished, whatever feelings I may have entertained of a more presumptuous nature, shall assuredly never again be expressed in words. As far as you are concerned it is as though they had never been. If I choose to treasure up a memory in the place where I never ought to have planted a hope, that must be my own affair, and you are welcome to call me a fool for my pains. But enough of this. I am now writing less as a suppliant imploring mercy, than an injured man demanding justice. I have tried over and over again for an opportunity of defending my conduct in person. I am at last driven to the less agreeable task of excusing myself by letter. Do not be impatient and unfair. I only ask you to read this in the spirit in which it is written.

"You had reason, good reason, I frankly admit, to be very deeply offended many months ago, and our outward reconciliation since then, though plausible enough, has not, I feel, been of a nature to re-establish terms of common cordiality and goodwill. You thought me, and I cannot blame you, over-bold, intriguing, and unscrupulous. You judged me guilty of gross presumption, of an act scarcely permissible to a gentleman, and I allow appearances were very much to my disadvantage. Ah, Mrs. Vandeleur, you little knew the feelings that prompted a step I have never since ceased to regret. You little knew my jealousy—mine! without a shadow of right—concerning everything that could be said or thought about one who was my ideal of goodness and truth. I felt persuaded it was impossible for you to do wrong. I felt equally determined to

ascertain the origin of a thousand rumours that it drove me wild to hear, and obtain for myself the power, if not the right, to contradict them on my own responsibility.

"In doing this I offended you beyond redemption. I do not deny your grievance. I do not wish to dwell one moment on so painful a subject. I only ask you to believe in my regret, in my sincerity; to place on my subsequent conduct that favourable construction which I have never forfeited by my actions, and to meet me in the world as a friend—nothing more. But, I entreat you, Mrs. Vandeleur—nothing less.

"Good-natured Dolly Egremont has sent me his box at the Accordion for the 10th. Though too near the stage, it is the best in the house. I am anxious to make up a party of people who know each other well, and have already secured Miss Tregunter. She can only spare us the evenings now from shopping for her *trousseau*. There are a few more, all favourites of your own. Can you be persuaded to join us? You will be doing a kindness to a great many people. You will be amused—even interested; and you will prove to me that, if not forgotten, at least my ill-judged precipitancy has been forgiven. Please send an answer, though I will take care a place is kept for you at anyrate.

"Little news this morning at White's or Boodle's. Lady Featherbrain is going to marry her old admirer after all. She has just driven him down St. James's Street in her mail-phaeton. They are taking five to two here that she throws him over before next Monday, the day for which the match is fixed. Young Fielder has not bolted after all. His father pays up, and he is to exchange. Poor Cotherstone, I fear, is dying. This, of course, will disqualify Purity, Hydropathist, and a great many more of the Clearwells that are never likely to be favourites.

"I had almost forgotten to say our box is for the first night of Gerard Ainslie's play. I hear it is to be a great success. Come and give your opinion. I shall then know that I may subscribe myself, as ever,—Your sincere friend,

"GRANVILLE BURTON."

"Poor fellow! I wonder whether he can really have cared for me after all!" was Mrs. Vandeleur's first thought when she read the above apologetic epistle. "Not a bit of it!" was her next, as she reflected on its measured diction and well-chosen expressions, artfully selected to avoid the remotest shadow of offence. "No. If it had come from his heart there would have been a little bitter to mix with all that sweet. Gerard would have reproached me half a dozen times in as many lines if he had felt ill-used. Ah! I don't believe anybody in the world ever cared for me as I like to be cared for, except Gerard. And now we must never meet. It does seem so hard! Well, I may go and see his play at anyrate. There can't be much harm in that. I suppose I must write a civil line to accept. I'll try and find Jane first. It looks odd of Mr. Burton, too, getting this box and then asking me to join his party. I'll wear my grey satin, I think, with the black lace. I wonder what he can be driving at!"

It was indeed impossible for her to guess, but Granville Burton did not usually drive at anything without being sure of the goal he intended to attain. In the present instance he had a great many objects in view, and the design of making a great many people uncomfortable—Dolly Egremont,

his affianced bride, Gerard Ainslie, Mrs. Vandeleur, himself not a little, inasmuch as the scratches he had sustained while endeavouring to detach the White Rose from her stem still smarted and rankled to the quick. Lastly, Madame Molinara, once the miller's daughter at Ripley, now the famous American star, whose name in letters four feet long was placarded on every dead wall in the metropolis.

Fanny's incognito had proved more difficult of preservation than she anticipated. Like many others, she imitated the ostrich, and hoped to escape observation only because it was her own desire to avoid notice. It is strange that her experience in the United States, where it is everybody's business to find out his neighbour's, had not taught her better. Such men as Granville Burton make a profession of knowing all about a new celebrity, never learning less, usually more, than the actual truth. Inquiring where they were born, and how and why. Ascertaining their education, their manners, their private means—above all, their secret peccadilloes. It is so pleasant to feel possessed of the freshest news at a dinner-party, to keep the key of a secret that shall excite all those guests to envious attention, watching or making the wished-for opportunity, and then, with calm superiority, proceeding in measured tones to detail that wicked little anecdote which nobody in London has heard before, that startling bit of news which has not yet found its way into the afternoon club or the evening paper. But, like the fishmonger, you must be careful no opposition dealer has fresher wares than yours. If once your story be capped, or its authenticity disputed by a better-informed rival, farewell to your superiority for weeks. Such a check is sometimes not to be got over in the whole of a London season.

Burton knew Count Tourbillon, of course, just as he knew every other notorious man in London. Equally of course, smoking their cigars in the sun (as we are glad to do in England), their discourse, originally attracted to the theme by a hurried nod Dolly Egremont gave them in passing, turned on that new celebrity, who, so the world said, was to make the fortune of their friend, his company, and everyone connected, however remotely, with the Accordion Theatre.

"They say she's a wonderful actress," observed the Dandy, in languid afternoon tones, as of a man whom no subject on earth could heartily interest.

"My faith—no!" replied the count. "Quick, brilliant, versatile, and producing great effect in superficial parts; but

for true passion, for deep repressed feeling—bah! She has no more power to express it than a ballet-dancer. See, she would make fury with an audience in the part of Lady Teazle. She would be hissed off after ten minutes if she attempted to play Ruth."

"You've seen her act?" inquired Burton.

"I have seen her act," answered Tourbillon in measured tones, repressing with difficulty the mocking smile his own words called up.

"Good-looking, they tell me," continued the Dandy, taking his hat off to a lady on horseback.

"Only on the stage," replied the other. "Hers is a beauty that needs the accessories of dress, jewels, lights, illusion. If you walked with her through a garden at sunset, you would say, 'I have deceived myself. This is a wearisome woman. Let us go to supper.' And she would accept the invitation willingly. Enfin, c'est une bonne grosse bourgeoise, et tout est dit!"

"Then you know her?" exclaimed Burton, waking up from his lethargy, delighted to think he could learn some particulars of the celebrity about whom everybody was talking.

"A friend of mine was once much entangled with her," answered the ready Frenchman. "Poor fellow! I do not like to think of it now. It is a sad story. Parlons d'autre chose."

But he had said enough to put his companion on the track, and with dogged perseverance Dandy Burton hunted it, step by step, till he had found out the truth, the whole truth, and a good deal more than the truth. With his large acquaintance, his inquiring turn of mind in all matters of scandal, his utter contempt for fair dealing in everything allied to the search for information, and the use he put it to when acquired, the Dandy could ferret out a mystery more promptly and certainly than any man, unconnected with the detective profession, in the whole of London. Perhaps his experience on the turf stood him in good stead, perhaps he was no little indebted to his own natural cunning and predilection for intrigue, but in a very few days he had identified Madame Molinara with the real Mrs. Ainslie, his former acquaintance, Fanny Draper of Ripley Mill; had satisfied himself the important discovery remained as yet almost exclusively his own, and had set about laying the train for a little explosion from which he anticipated much gratification in the way of spite, malice, and revenge. His information

had cost him a dinner at his club to the American minister, an invitation for a duchess's ball to an Italian gentleman once connected with the theatre at Milan, a box of cigars to Mr. Barrington-Belgrave, formerly Bruff, and three half-crowns at intervals to a seedy individual in black, once a tout, lately a dog-stealer, now a professional vagabond. He considered the results very cheap at the money.

Dolly Egremont's box was then secured for the first night of *Pope Clement; or, the Cardinal's Collapse.* It would be a great stroke of business, thought the Dandy, to collect in that narrow space the following elements, both discordant and sympathetic:—

First, Miss Tregunter, on whose feelings the blazing effects of Madame Molinara's attractions, and the general stage-business in which her plighted bridegroom must necessarily be absorbed, could not fail to produce a very disagreeable impression.

Next, Dolly himself, over whom the ill-humour of his ladye-love would lower like a blight, withering up his good spirits and good-humour during the ensuing twenty-four hours, and making him wish, perhaps, for an evil moment, that he had left his petulant passion-flower blooming on her stalk.

Then Gerard Ainslie, the author of the piece, to whom such an unwelcome appearance of a wife he had forgotten, thus resuscitated to enact the leading part in his play, would be a bugbear none the less startling, that he witnessed it for the first time by the side of the woman he had loved so long, and had hoped at last to make his own.

And she! The White Rose! Burton would have his revenge then! That pride of hers, that had over-ridden him so haughtily, would be humbled to the dust—and in his own presence too, by his own dexterity. Perhaps, in her despair and her humiliation, the forbearance, the generosity, the good feeling he would make it his business to display, might win her for him after all.

Norah wondered, as we have learned, "what the Dandy was driving at!" She would have been indignant, no doubt, but she must have felt flattered, could she have known that to attain his goal he would have spared neither whip-cord nor horse-flesh, grudged no material, shrank from no risk, shutting his eyes to the probability of an upset, the certainty of a break-down, and the undoubted absurdity of the whole journey.

CHAPTER LIV

PALLIATIVES

MRS. VANDELEUR dried her tears and rang for the carriage. It had been twenty minutes at the door. She hastened upstairs, bathed her eyes, sprinkled a little dirt in the shape of pearl powder on her face, and, discarding her maid's choice, selected a bonnet she considered more becoming under the circumstances. It was no use looking her worst she thought, and despite such judicious applications, the tell-tale eyelids were still reddened—the delicate face was paler than its wont. But she felt better. Some of the sharpness of the blow had passed away. Burton's letter proved to a certain extent an anodyne. It diverted her mind from the one great sorrow, gave her cause for reflection as to what she must decide about the play, and, above all, opened up a narrow glimpse of hope. Yes, there was a chance, nay, almost a certainty, of seeing Gerard once again. Happiness is, after all, very relative. Yesterday she pined and fretted because she could not spend her whole life with him, to-day she blessed and cherished the mere possibility of hearing his voice for five minutes in the crowded box of a theatre!

Of course he would come! She had heard much of the eagerness with which authors are believed to watch the progress of their own productions, and, not being familiar with the class, voted it an impossibility that Gerard should absent himself from the Accordion on the first night of his play. Madame Molinara too had made such a point of her presence. Poor Fanny might feel hurt if she never went to see her act. This would be an excellent opportunity, and to find husband and wife under the same roof, whether they recognised each other or not, would confirm her own good resolutions so strongly, and be so beneficial to herself! The last seemed an unanswerable argument. She was persuaded, no doubt, that for a hundred such reasons, and not because of her intense thirst and longing to set eyes on Gerard once more,

she had determined to accept Burton's invitation, should she find on inquiry there was any likelihood Mr. Ainslie would make one of the party.

To ascertain this point, she bethought herself it would be well to call on Jane Tregunter forthwith. Were not Gerard Ainslie and Dolly Egremont fast friends, sure to be familiar with each other's movements? Was not the latter gentleman bound in the most abject slavery to his affianced bride? He could have no secrets from dear Jane, and dear Jane, she was sure, had no secrets from her.

Now, with Miss Tregunter's family, and in her own circle, there existed a pleasant fiction, upheld zealously enough, that the heiress never occupied her excellent town house in solitude, or, as she was pleased to term it, "on her own hook."

Relatives of different degrees, but of steady age and habits, were supposed to reside with her in continual succession, thus warding off the offensive strictures of Mrs. Grundy, who, with her usual consistency, saw not the slightest impropriety so long as the young lady only ordered her own carriages at her own time to go where she pleased, with entire independence of action when out of her own house. It was at present Aunt Emily's turn of duty to mount guard over her niece, but Aunt Emily, who was prolific, and fond of her children, had been summoned home to nurse a croupy little girl, the youngest of ten, and Jane Tregunter, absorbed in her *trousseau*, was just as much a *femme seule* as Lady Baker, who had buried two husbands, and might have seen out half a dozen, or Madame Molinara, who had found one more than enough. All this she explained with considerable volubility, before Norah had been in the house five minutes, pausing in her discourse but once to kiss her visitor rapturously, and exclaim—

"Darling! What a love of a bonnet!"

"And so, dear," continued the *fiancée*, "here I am as independent as the Queen of Sheba, only mine isn't a Solomon, you know; far from it, dear fellow! he was always a goose; but then he's such an honest one. And I'm ready to go anywhere with you, and do anything, and, in short, I'm game for any enormity you like to mention in the way of a lark. Only put a name to it, and here you are! Do you know, it's a great pull not having married young— Nonsense, Norah, I'm very nearly as old as you, only I don't look it. That sounds complimentary! Darling, you know I always said you were beautiful, and so you are, but it's

impossible for me, with my chubby cheeks, and turned-up nose, ever to look like anything but a schoolgirl! I wish it wasn't. It's so much nicer to have some expression of countenance. A woman at my age should have lost her baby-face. She ought to seem more as if she had 'been, done, and suffered,' like a verb, you know. Even Dolly says yours is the most lovable face he ever saw. I'm not jealous, though. I don't consider him a very good judge, so you see I'm not vain either, though you'll declare I am when I've taken you upstairs to show you my new dresses; and I'm sure the presents on that table in the back drawing-room are enough to make one as proud as a peacock!"

It is, perhaps, needless to observe that for everybody who came to call on the future Mrs. Egremont, these "presents in the back drawing-room" were just as much a part of the show as the new gowns, the new bonnets, the new stockings, handkerchiefs, gloves, and petticoats, nay, the new *fiancée* herself. Mrs. Vandeleur, as in duty bound, exhausted her whole vocabulary of praise.

"Beautiful! exquisite! uncommon! perfect! How thoroughly French! How completely Spanish! What extraordinary workmanship, in such thoroughly good taste too! And the writing-case, dear, it must have been made on purpose; who gave you that?"

Miss Tregunter's rosy face became the rosier for a passing suffusion.

"Oh, that is a little attention of Mr. Burton's. You know he proposed to me, dear. Wasn't it funny? Do you think I ought to take it?"

Mrs. Vandeleur opened her blue eyes.

"Proposed to you, Jane!" she repeated. "And you never told me! When was it?"

"Oh! a long time ago," answered the other hastily. "At the end of last season, just before I went abroad. I met him the same night at Lady Featherbrain's fancy ball. Wasn't it awkward?"

Norah pondered. That was the very day she had herself refused this adventurous swain, without, however, considering it necessary to confide his offer to her intimate friend. Obviously, neither lady had been sufficiently proud of her conquest to make it public.

"Well, you can't send it back now," she replied gravely; adding, after a moment's thought, "Janey, you were quite right not to marry him."

"Marry him!" echoed Miss Tregunter, and the tone

sufficiently convinced her listener that Dolly never had anything to fear from the rivalry of his old fellow-pupil.

"But what a duck of a bracelet!" continued Mrs. Vandeleur, taking from the purple morocco case in which it was coiled an unequalled specimen of the jeweller's art.

"Oh! the bracelet!" exclaimed the other. "Isn't it a love? Isn't it per—fection? Now, who do you suppose sent me that? I can't think why, I'm sure, except that he is a great friend of yours. Who but dear, quiet, melancholy, good-looking Mr. Ainslie. The jewels are magnificent, and the setting *too* beautiful! Do you know, Norah, every morsel of that gold he found and dug out himself, while he was in Australia or California, or wherever people go who are ruined and want to make their fortunes!"

It was Mrs. Vandeleur's turn to blush, but she hid her crimson face over the ornament, and in a few seconds it had grown even paler than before. He dug the gold himself, did he, poor fellow! How she pictured in her mind the bivouac fires, the red shirts, the bronzed, bearded comrades, the barren ridges, the starlit sky, the gloomy, desolate grandeur of the scene. She could almost fancy she saw the dear face, thoughtful, weather-beaten, careworn, gazing wistfully into the glowing embers, while his thoughts travelled back to England; or hushed and calm in sleep, while he dreamed of the woman he had loved so hopelessly and so well.

A tear fell heavily on those burnished links of hard-won gold. It was all very well to be patient, resolute, right-minded, but the rebellious heart *would* make itself heard, and she *must* see him once again. Just once again, and then she would accept her fate!

"Janey," asked the White Rose, discreetly changing the subject as far as her companion was concerned. "What are you going to do on the 10th? I had some thoughts of the play if this cool weather lasts. Come and dine with me. I'll ask Mr. Egremont, of course, and we'll all go together."

"Play, my dear!" answered the other. "I'm sick of the very name of plays. How any man in his senses can make himself the slave Dolly is to a parcel of odious mountebanks seems to me perfectly incomprehensible. Would you believe it, Norah, he never got away from that hateful Accordion till half-past twelve last night? And he couldn't stay to luncheon, or you'd have found him here, where, to be sure, he'd have been rather in our way, because he had a disgusting rehearsal at two. Then the letters he gets, and the bills, and the bothers with the newspapers, and those shocking actresses!

My dear, it's a continual worry, that drives me out of my senses!"

"I suppose you will soon put a stop to it," observed Mrs. Vandeleur meaningly.

"I believe you!" answered Jane. "Wait till I'm fairly in the saddle, and if I don't make him as tractable as Tomboy, I'm very much mistaken. Poor fellow! it's only fair to say he'd get out of it at once if he could, but he's so deep in the thing now, he must go on till the theatre closes. I wish they'd shut it up to-morrow. Well, qui vivra verra. If that Madame Molinara ever sets foot in my house, I'll give her leave to stay there for good and all!"

Ere Miss Tregunter could work herself into a fume under this imaginary grievance, Norah recalled the conversation artfully to the point.

"Then you'd rather not go, dear?" said she in her soft, quiet tones. "Don't, if it bores you."

"I must!" replied this energetic martyr. "I can't get out of it! I'll come to you and welcome, but we must dine awfully early, for I've promised to be there for the first scene. It's some new play Dolly makes a ridiculous fuss about, only because this dreadful American woman acts in it, I verily believe. There's a lot of us going. Theresa, and Cousin Charlie, and Mr. Ainslie; and, in short, as many as the box will hold. It's Mr. Burton's party, and I don't want to be ruder to him just now than I can help."

Mrs. Vandeleur's heart gave a little leap, not, I imagine, from the prospect of meeting either Theresa or Cousin Charlie. She would see Gerard then, possibly speak to him, and it would, of course, be much easier after that to sustain an eternal separation. She steadied her voice admirably while she repeated her invitation, begging the guest to name her own dinner-hour, insisting with unusual energy on the inconvenience of making it too late.

"And now," said Miss Tregunter, holding the door open with the air of a chairman at a Board of Directors, "all this is what I call extraneous matter. Let us proceed with the *real* business of the meeting."

I suppose that to our coarser male organisation the deep and beautiful sublimity of Dress must ever remain a forbidden worship—a mystery unrevealed. Not to man's grosser sense is vouchsafed the judicious taste in colour, the discriminating touch for texture, the unerring glance for shape. We possess, indeed, our uniforms (hideous!), our sporting dresses (barbarous!), our official costumes (grotesque!), but to the

stronger and stupider animal undoubtedly has been denied that heartfelt rapture which, in all matters of gauzes, muslins, silks, satins, and brocades, springs from a sense essentially feminine, to be termed with propriety the pleasure of the eye.

Miss Tregunter's *trousseau*, exclusive of a closet in which, like Bluebeard's wives, hung six various-coloured dresses, filled two spacious bedrooms and a dressing-room. For one heavenly half-hour the ladies roamed at will through these gardens of delight. During this too brief period of enjoyment, it is my belief that Miss Tregunter, except as a remote first cause for such gratifying display, never gave her future husband a thought, that the pain in Mrs. Vandeleur's fond heart was lulled, even deadened, by the power of that wondrous magic which has never been known to fail. Alas! that it came out all the sharper and more piercing later in the day, when, driving home, she met the well-known figure on horseback. And Gerard Ainslie, not stopping to speak, took his hat off with a cold, proud, distant greeting. It was some little consolation to mark that he looked pale, worn, and ill; to gather from his appearance that he too was not without his cares; that however cross he might be, he felt likewise almost as unhappy as herself.

CHAPTER LV

ANODYNES

WOULD she have loved him better had she guessed his morning's work? Does not the water-lily, torn cruelly up by its roots, only to slide from an eager, disappointed grasp, seem fairer and fairer as the pitiless stream bears it farther and farther out of reach? Are any of us really aware of its worth while our treasure lies under lock and key, ready to gladden the eye and warm the heart at our daily caprice? No. I think when the thief is at the door, we wake to a sense of its importance, perhaps only to learn its full value when the casket has been rifled and the jewel stolen away.

Gerard Ainslie, like the majority of mankind, was not so constituted as to resist oft-repeated attacks of vexation and disappointment. Nay, there was so much of the woman in his temperament as rendered him patient and trusting at one season, suspicious and easily disheartened at another. Like a woman, too, while full of courage to dare, and fortitude to endure, there were certain blows from which he made no effort to recover, certain injuries he would accept unresisting, to sink under them without a struggle. When the poor camel falls beneath that last ounce of burden, the meek eyes only urge their piteous reproach in silence; the weary head droops gently to its rest without complaint, but never rises from the desert sand again! Some years ago, perhaps, our gold-digger might have faced a great sorrow as becomes a man; but the heart has thus much affinity with the brain—should I not add, the stomach?—that it will only bear a fixed amount of ill-usage, or even of justifiable wear and tear. Take too many liberties with it, and, no more than the intellect or the digestion, will it continue to perform its functions. There comes a paralysis of the feelings, as of the senses; and that is indeed a dreary death-in-life which drops its arms in hopeless lassitude, and says, "I have shot my bolt; I have run my chance—sink or swim, what matter? I accept my fate!"

Rash cowardice, is it not? But a cowardice to which the bravest spirits are sometimes the most susceptible. Accept your fate! What is this but yielding the stakes before the game is played out? Scuttling the ship before she strikes and fills? Surrendering the fort, and going over with arms, standards, and ammunition to the enemy? The man who succeeds in love, war, money-making, is he who will not accept his fate—no, not though it be rammed down his throat!—but frowns, and grins, and strives, never yielding an inch unless to win back two, and so, by sheer force of dogged obstinacy and perseverance, gaining the hard fight at last, and grasping the prize—to find, perhaps, after all, it is scarce worth taking. Never mind, however valueless the victory, the struggle is not without its good results.

Now Gerard, from an inconsistency of character peculiar to such sensitive dispositions, though he had hoped on while there really seemed no hope, gallantly enough, became so relaxed by a gleam of unexpected happiness, that when adversity lowered once more, he could not endure the reaction, and gave in. He felt like some mariner who, after battling with contrary gales a whole voyage through, makes his port in a fair wind that veers round and drives him out to sea again ere he can enter the harbour. Like some gold-seeker, who has travelled, and starved, and shivered, and prospected, and reached a likely spot at last, to find nothing but quartz, dirty water, sand, perhaps a little mica, but never a grain of the pure, yellow, virgin gold.

I do not hold this man was by any means wise thus to set up a fellow-creature for a fetish, and exact from his idol supernatural perfection; but, having adopted the superstition, degrading or otherwise, it would perhaps have been more consistent and more comfortable to stick fanatically to his worship, how much soever the image had become defaced, its pedestal lowered, its gilding tarnished, or its paint worn off.

It is a hard truth, but probably no woman that ever wore a smile was worth one-tenth of the vexation, the longing, the weariness of spirit, caused by hundreds of them in hearts twice as kindly and honest as their own. Yet if men did not thus put a fictitious price on that which they covet, and pay it too, readily enough, what would become of romance, poetry, three-volume novels, the book of fashions, and the ladies' newspaper? Cosmetics would be a drug, *chignons* unsaleable, jewellers might shut up shop, Madame Dèvy would be bankrupt, Madame Vigoureuse paralysed, and Madame Rachel in the Bench.

Such questions of demand and supply never occurred to Gerard's aching heart. Sore and angry, he determined Norah was no longer worthy of her place in his breast, and resolved, therefore, unphilosophically enough, to make himself as miserable as he could during the rest of his life. He was one of those gentlemen, very scarce, they tell me, in the present day, who despise Moore's sagacious warning—

> 'Tis folly when flowers around us rise,
> To make light of the rest if the rose be not there,
> And the world is so rich in voluptuous eyes,
> 'Twere a pity to limit one's love to a pair.

Like a spoilt child whose favourite toy is broken, he declined to play any more, and refused to be comforted.

There is a strange impulse in restless spirits that urges them ever towards set of sun. "Westward ho!" seems the natural outcry of weariness and discontent. "You may go to h—ll!" said the stump orator to his constituents, who had failed to re-elect him for Congress, "and I'll go to Texas!" Something of the same sentiment hardened Gerard's heart when he saw the round of fashion and amusement whirling about him in the gaiety of a London season; that gaiety which, pleasant as it is, seems such a bitter mockery to an empty or an aching heart. Of Texas, indeed, he had heard too much to make it his refuge, but for a few thousand pounds he bought a great many thousand acres in the neighbourhood of Buenos Ayres, and thither he resolved to betake himself forthwith, fitting out for the purpose a goodly barque of considerable tonnage, which he proposed to command as captain and sailing-master, lading her with a cargo of "notions" that could not fail to make handsome profits, and selecting with great care a crew of honest, able-bodied "salts" such as it would be a pride and a pleasure to employ. "If anything can take the nonsense out of a fellow," thought Gerard, "it will be such a trip as this. Constant work, heavy responsibility, lots of foul weather, and then a bad bargain to make the best of, a life in the open air, and a score of half-broken horses to gallop about a farm of fifty thousand acres!"

To this end he proceeded to dispose, by sale and gift, of the necessary articles constituting a bachelor's establishment in London. Two or three pictures, several boxes of cigars, a self-adjusting filter, the Racing Calendar complete, two bull-terriers, a piping bullfinch, a mail-phaeton, a circular brougham, several valuable canes, a harmonium, and a stud of hunters.

It was pleasant for Mrs. Vandeleur, reading the *Morning Post* at breakfast, to come on such an advertisement as this from the pen of Messrs. Tattersall:—

"To be sold without reserve, as the owner is about to leave England, the following horses, well known in Leicestershire, the property of Gerard Ainslie, Esq.," succeeded by a string of high-sounding appellations dwindling at last to "Jack and Jill, quiet in harness, and have been constantly driven together," and concluded by "Norah Creina, a favourite hack."

"He might have kept her," thought Mrs. Vandeleur, "if only for the name!" but her eyes filled with tears, and to swallow them did not improve her appetite for breakfast.

Their joint sorrow was unequally divided, the woman as usual having the larger share. Gerard sought relief in sheer hard work of mind and body. To a certain extent he found it. A long day passed at the docks, carefully overlooking fittings and repairs for his ship; a dozen interviews with different merchants, all men of the strictest probity, but with whom it was business to get the better of him if he neglected to keep his eyes open; a hunt through Wapping and its purlieus, after, here a boatswain's mate, and there a ship's carpenter, with unceasing research for top-men, smart but not "cheeky," knowing their duty yet not wholly given over to drink—these varied labours would sometimes tire him so completely that after an hour's smoking he was glad to go to sleep in his chair, only leaving it to toss and tumble through a wakeful night in bed.

Then, mistaking fatigue of body for peace of mind, he would vote himself cured of his infatuation, and to prove it, even changed the barque's name, substituting for her humble appellation of *The Simple Susan*, a more suggestive title as *The White Rose.*

He pitied himself, as the French say, very deeply, and this form of sympathy is not without a spurious consolation of its own. His friends, too, afforded him the usual commiseration, vaguely wondering why they saw him so seldom, but accepting the loss of his society with resignation, and troubling themselves not at all about its cause. Dolly, entering the Club he most affected, about five o'clock in the afternoon, found a knot of intimates thus bewailing the absentee.

"Has Ainslie got any sound horses amongst those wretches I saw to-day at Tattersall's? I want two or three hunters if I can get my sort. Anybody know anything about any of them?"

"I should just like to see you follow him"

The speaker was a stout florid young man, who looked rich, stupid, and good-natured. He loved hunting very dearly, was extremely well-mounted, very particular that his horses should be safe fencers, and equally careful only to ride them at safe places. As his friend and toady Mr. Agincourt, commonly called Blueskin, was wont to observe, "It seemed a good system, making the odds two to one in his favour."

That gentleman laid down the *Globe* and rose from his chair. "There's one you ought to buy," said he dictatorially, for he understood his profession, and smoothed a patron's plumage from the higher standing-point: "the chestnut with a thin tail; 'Bobstay' they call him in the list. I saw him go last season from Gumley Wood to the Caldwell, right across the Langtons, and he never put a foot wrong! I don't believe there's such another fencer in England. Old Fly-by-night gave me two falls following him in and out of the Harborough road. The distance isn't much, but I'll trouble you for the 'oxers.' No horse that can go straight in that country should slip through your fingers. I shall be at Tattersall's at anyrate, and I'll bid for him if you like."

"I suppose Ainslie don't ride much," observed the other, a gratuitous assumption enthusiastically repudiated by young Lord Rasperdale.

"Ride, Jerry!" exclaimed that outspoken nobleman; "I should just like to see you bound to follow him. Why, he beat every man jack of us last March on a thorough-bred horse he calls Lucifer—the beggar they returned so often as unrideable—in that good run from John-o'-Gaunt. There were only three fellows out of Melton got to the end, and I wasn't one of them, but he was. Ride, indeed! the only fault I can find in his riding is that he's a turn too hard!"

"The more fool he," replied imperturbable Jerry. "Then, Blueskin, I think you and I will just pop in presently and have a look at Bobstay. But why is he sending them up? Is it a *bonâ fide* sale, or does he only want to get rid of the drafts?"

"Don't you know?" observed an elderly smoke-dried man from the writing-table. "Do you mean to say you haven't heard? This Mr. Ainslie is but a man-of-straw, after all. What you young fellows call 'a chalk' performer. I don't believe he ever had a shilling more than two thousand a year, and he's been living as if he'd twenty. Good fun, I dare say, while it lasted; but result—smash! Everything's to be sold—

pianofortes, guinea-fowls, carriages, villa at Teddington, yacht at Cowes; in short, the whole plant. Jerry needn't alarm himself about the horses. Take my word for it, they're not to be bought in, if they go for five pounds a-piece!"

"I think you're mistaken about the money," said Mr. Agincourt. "I've always understood he succeeded to a large fortune, but it was all in Blight's bank; and when that broke our friend went his mucker with the others, and we shall never see him here again."

"I'll take ten to one about that," interposed a young Guardsman, solacing himself with a chicken sandwich and dry sherry. "I don't believe he'd money in Blight's bank, any more than I have in Cox's! No, it's that American woman who has cleaned out Ainslie. What's her name? This new actress coming out at the Accordion. Here's a fellow who'll tell us all about it. Dolly, what's the name of your new star, that you make such a row about, and why did you let her have a run at Ainslie first, instead of the other Jerry here, who's twice as big a fool with twice as big a fortune?"

"He's not a fool. He's not ruined. He's no more to do with Madame Molinara than you have," answered Dolly honestly enough, and standing up as usual for his friend. "Why a fellow can't sell his horses and go abroad for a lark, without everybody swearing he's a blackguard and a sharper, is one of those scandals which beat me altogether, I confess. Ainslie's got six thousand a year if he has a penny, and I don't believe he ever spoke to my new actress in his life!"

"Bravo, manager!" shouted half a dozen voices. "That's right, Dolly. Stick up for the shop! You only say so to defend the respectability of your theatre!"

Like a baited bull, Dolly turned from one to another of his tormentors.

"Ask Burton," said he, pointing to the latter, who had been sitting silent in a corner, behind the evening paper; "he knows all about him. Ask the Dandy, if you don't believe me."

That gentleman pointed to his forehead.

"Quite true," he replied, with a gentle smile of commiseration. "I have known poor Ainslie from a boy. He was always very queer. Not mad exactly; at least, not mad enough to be shut up, but subject to fits of flightiness, you know, and alarmingly violent at times. It is best to get him abroad during these attacks, and I'm glad he is going. Poor

fellow, it's very sad for himself and very painful to his friends!"

As usual, not for ten men who heard the slander did one listen to its contradiction—Dolly's indignant protest being lost in the uprising of the conclave to go and talk the whole thing over again, a mile and a half off, in the Park.

CHAPTER LVI

TOLD OUT

THE Dandy was not mad, far from it, and nobody would have attributed his ruin to anything like want of caution or care for Number One. Nevertheless, he was at this very period in the last stage of undeclared bankruptcy, having arrived at that hopeless point so touchingly described in the well-known parody (perhaps the best of its kind ever written) on Locksley Hall—

> Credit shook the glass of Time, and dribbled out the golden sand,
> Every day became more valueless my frequent note of hand.

Mr. Burton, to use an expression of the money market, had "a good deal of paper out." Little of it, I fear, was of greater value than that which is made into tags for the tail of a kite. Certain of the tribe of Judah had already refused to look at it. They declared it "wouldn't wash,"—an objection one would hardly have expected gentlemen of their appearance to entertain. His own Christian man of business, a respectable solicitor, had long ago given him up as a bad job. "Your position, my good sir," said that sagacious person, "is beset with difficulties. I scarcely know what to advise, but, under all circumstances, the closest retrenchment is indispensable!"

Now "the closest retrenchment" was exactly that form of amendment to which the Dandy was most averse. In his eyes, any other way of escape seemed preferable. His habits were formed now, and those indulgences which once afforded such keen gratification as superfluities of luxury, had become daily necessities of life. It is not your thoughtless, reckless, devil-may-care spendthrift, who walks through his thousands, few or many, in a couple of London seasons and a winter at Rome, that feels the real pressure of poverty when his last hundred has vanished after the rest. No; these graceless spirits are usually constituted with considerable energy, faultless digestions, and marvellous powers of enjoyment. The Lord Mayor, or the Pope, or somebody, gives them a lift

when they least expect it; they turn their hands to work with as keen a zest as once they did to play, and find as much fun in five shillings as they used to extract from five pounds. Such men often end by building up a fortune ten times as large as the one they kicked down. But the selfish, cold-blooded sensualist, the drone that loves the honey for its own sake, and thinks by superior cunning to overreach the bees; the man of pleasure, who draws from every sovereign its twenty-shillings' worth of gratification, neither throwing away nor giving away a farthing, who calculates extravagance as others do economy, and deliberately weighs the present indulgence against the coming crash, undeterred by the consciousness that pre-arranged insolvency is neither more nor less than swindling, he it is who discovers, to his cost, when money and credit are both gone, they have taken with them everything that makes life worth having, and left nothing in their place but a broken constitution, an enfeebled mind, a nerveless arm, and a diabolical temper. Such are the results of systematic pleasure-seeking, and for such ailments friends advise and doctors prescribe in vain.

This deplorable state Dandy Burton, notwithstanding his enviable start in life, bade fair to reach at last. Latterly, as he told himself with bitter emphasis, for he confided in none else, everything had gone against him. His winnings on the Turf had been invested at high interest in a foreign railway, which must have paid admirably had it ever been constructed on anything but an engineer's plan. To meet his losses he had been compelled to borrow of the Jews. He bought a share in the best two-year-old of its own, or perhaps any other year, and in this transaction showed his usual judgment; but the two-year-old broke its leg at exercise, and no amount of care or forethought could have prevented the catastrophe. A farm he sold realised less than was anticipated. A great-aunt, from whom he expected an opportune legacy, died suddenly, and "cut up," as he expressed it, far worse than anybody would have supposed. Then came powers of attorney, calling in of balances, mortgaging of acres, and sale of reversions. Lastly, bills drawn, accepted, renewed: and so the clouds seemed to gather from each quarter of the heavens, ready to burst in a thunderstorm over his head.

And all the time he had not the heart to forego the vainest pleasure, the resolution to give up the smallest luxury. He must keep his brougham, of course—no fellow could do without his brougham; and the T-cart—every fellow had a T-cart; also, it was impossible for the same animal to go in

both. Putting down the saddle-horses would be simply to advertise his ruin, and bring the Philistines on him at once. A stall at each opera-house seemed a positive economy, for where else could he pass the evening without spending more money? The same argument held good regarding his share in the omnibus-box. Poole he didn't pay, of course,—that great and good man never expected it; while bills for gloves, books, eau-de-cologne, and such small personalties, were liquidated by fresh orders easily enough. He often considered the subject, and as often came to the conclusion that his habits were really regulated with due regard to economy, and there was no direction in which he could retrench. To leave off attending races would certainly save a few paltry "fivers" in railway fares; but then, was it wise to lose the experience of a lifetime, and miss, perhaps, the one good thing that to pull off would put matters again almost on the square? He certainly belonged to too many clubs, but out of which should he take his name, for the sake of the miserable ten-pound subscription he had paid his entrance-money on purpose to defray? One was the only place in London where fellows were to be met with between four and five p.m. It would be a pity to leave another till that '34 claret was drunk out. At a third a man might ask a friend to dinner; at a fourth, play whist for hundred-pound points, if he fancied it; at a fifth, smoke cigars in an atmosphere you could cut with a knife during any hour of the twenty-four; while a sixth boasted the unspeakable advantage that its members comprised all the stars of the literary world, though none of them ever seemed to go near it by day or night. Obviously, nothing in the way of retrenchment could be done as regarded clubs. Then his daily life, he argued, his own personal habits, were of the simplest and most ascetic. Chocolate was the only thing he ever could drink for breakfast, and it could surely be no fault of his that cigars were not to be bought fit to smoke under seventy shillings a pound. Turkish baths every day came cheaper than visits from a doctor, and nothing but those searching sudorifics enabled him to drink dry champagne, the only wine that really agreed with him now. He might save a ten-pound note, perhaps, on the whole year, by dismissing Brown, to whom he paid unusually high wages; but then Brown saved him a fortune, he always reckoned, in many valuable receipts for varnish, hair-oil, shaving-soap, and such articles of the toilet; while his system of never settling the valet's book till it rose to a hundred pounds, and then writing a cheque for the amount, spared him an infinity of

trouble, and seemed a wise financial transaction enough. Brown, too, was an invaluable servant in so many ways. Everybody wanted to engage a Brown. He knew the addresses of all his master's friends, the post-towns of every country-house they frequented, the stations at which fast trains stopped, and those where post-horses were not to be procured. Arriving late at his Grace's or my Lord's, or the Squire's, in five minutes dressing-things were laid out as if by magic — bath ready, towels aired, letters inquired for, all necessary information as to hours, habits, and guests respectfully reported, while, however early a start might be made next morning, leathers appeared spotless, and guns oiled, as if Brown sat up all night. He could guess from the proposed beat what number of cartridges were likely to be shot away before luncheon; and not another valet in Europe but Brown could tell whether a frost was too hard for hunting. It was a mystery how he found time to make acquaintance with all the ladies'-maids, and through them to learn so much about the doings of their mistresses. An invaluable servant, thought Burton—so quick, so quiet, so respectful, so trustworthy, such a good manner, and, above all, so devoted to his master's interests. No; he could not afford to part with Brown!

So the Dandy wrote one or two letters which, notwithstanding his high opinion of the valet's fidelity, he resolved to post with his own hands; and dressing scrupulously, as usual, sauntered off to his club.

Mr. Brown laid out his master's evening clothes, shook, brushed, and folded those lately taken off, removed every speck from his own irreproachable costume, and proceeded to the house of call he most affected, where he ordered a glass of cold brandy and water, not too strong, with which he diluted the perusal of *Bell's Life*, not omitting to study the odds for a great race, on which many a nobleman would have liked to make as good a book as Mr. Brown's. His occupation was interrupted by a showily dressed, flash-looking individual with dark eyes, a good deal of whisker, and a red face, who accosted him with great cordiality, and a pressing invitation to drink, calling for a bottle of champagne on the spot, which was promptly placed before them, both gentlemen preferring that pleasant wine out of ice.

"Mr. Jacobs," said the valet in his usual staid tones, "here's your good health. You're looking well, sir, and I'm glad to see our horse holds his own in the betting, though Tim telegraphs as he's done our commission at Liverpool."

Mr. Jacobs leered with his fine eyes, and smiled with his ugly mouth. "Here's luck!" said he. "We've pulled together in this here business strong, Mr. Brown, and it's the best thing as I've been in since Corkscrew's year. It's not half so good a game as it was then. There's plenty of flats left," he added in a voice of plaintive regret; "but the flats knows they is flats now. Ah! it's a great pity, it is. While as for the young ones—why, there's never such a thing. It seems to me in these days they're all born with their wisdom-teeth cut and their whiskers growed."

Mr. Brown made no answer. His own wisdom-teeth had been through the gums many a long year, and kept his tongue habitually in their custody. The other, filling both glasses, proceeded more cheerfully, "We might do a good stroke of business, you and me, Mr. Brown, suppose we worked together regular, with nothing to interfere. Why, as I was a-saying to 'Nobby' only last night at this here table, a man of your form is quite thrown away in such a profession as yours. There ain't no scope for you, not what I calls elbow-room. 'It's downright foolery,' says Nobby. 'I wonder as Brown ain't sick and tired of it, and that's the truth!'"

"I have some thoughts of retiring," answered Mr. Brown, who had indeed made his mind up long ago to the course he should adopt, and was only here now for what he could get. "My 'ealth isn't quite what it used to be, and change of hair at the different meetings always does me a world of good. We might work it, as you say, Mr. Jacobs, you and me. We can depend on one another, can't us?"

The dark eyes shot an eager glance in the speaker's face. "Then he is going!" exclaimed Mr. Jacobs, emptying his glass at a gulp. "I'm a straightforward chap, I am, and I never has no secrets from a pal. There isn't another man in the ring what I call so fair and above-board as yours truly. Now, I tell you what it is, Brown. I've calculated your 'boss' to a day—I may say to an hour. I never gave him longer than the week after next. If he goes a minute sooner you'll tip me the office, won't you now? Honour!"

He pulled a notecase from his breast-pocket, and thrust a crumpled piece of thin suggestive paper into Mr. Brown's unresisting hand. That worthy never moved a muscle of his countenance.

"He bought a foreign 'Bradshaw,'" said he, "the day before yesterday. Mr. Poole, he sent in a lot of new clothes last night. There's been three gentlemen and a horse-dealer to look at our hacks. More than that, he's posted five letters

in the last two days himself. I'm sure of it, for I keep count of the envelopes in his writing-case, and there's the same number of postage-stamps missing. I shall know, never fear, if he means bolting; and you can trust me as if it was yourself. No, I won't have another bottle, thank ye, Mr. Jacobs. I'm going out to tea directly. If there's anything fresh to-morrow, I'll drop you a line by post."

So Mr. Brown walked leisurely off to his tea-party, and thence proceeded home to superintend his master's dinner-toilet, affording him the usual assistance in his usual quiet unobtrusive manner, with as much tact and forethought as if he had no other study on earth, nor intended to apply himself to anything else while he lived. The Dandy, dressing early and somewhat in haste for a club-dinner, reflected how impossible it would be to do without such a servant, and even pondered on the wisdom of confiding to his faithful valet the secret of his ruin, to afford him the option of accompanying his master at a lower rate of wages into exile.

CHAPTER LVII

FOR AULD LANG SYNE

IF Gerard Ainslie, disgusted with life in general, and the White Rose in particular, took but little interest in his own play, now on the eve of representation, so culpable an indifference could not be said to extend to manager, actors, nor subordinates of the Accordion Theatre. The bills stated no more than the truth, when they affirmed that scenery, dresses, decorations, etc., were all new. Full rehearsals had rendered the players exceedingly perfect in their parts, and although much dissatisfaction was expressed at a certain want of fire in the dialogue, not a word could be said in disparagement of the gorgeous costumes that decorated the very supernumeraries in such scenes as the Pope's universal benediction, or the Grand Chorus (upwards of a hundred voices) in front of the Cardinal's Palace. An illustrative piece of music had also been written on purpose for the melodrama; that is to say, favourite airs from various operas slightly altered were tacked together, and played a little faster than usual. Every nerve was strained, every resource of the establishment exhausted to render *Pope Clement*; *or, the Cardinal's Collapse*, what is termed a success, and his whole company seconded their manager's efforts with something more than common professional zeal, something due to the genial character and universal popularity of the man. Madame Molinara had shown herself indeed a little troublesome in occasional absence from rehearsal, and carelessness when there; but nobody who saw her walk across the stage, even by daylight, could doubt she was a thorough artist, and understood the very smallest *minutiæ* of her profession. Dolly could not repress his raptures; much to that young lady's disgust, he

even enlarged on the excellences of his importation in presence of Miss Tregunter.

"She can just act above a bit," exclaimed our enthusiastic manager. "If I'd only known of her six months sooner, before they gave her that exorbitant engagement at New York, she would have made all our fortunes, and I'd have got a *trousseau* of my own—

> Like other charmers, wooing the caress
> More dazzlingly, when daring in full dress.
> I won't go on—the sequel you can guess!"

Miss Tregunter very properly snubbed him no less for the glaring impropriety of his quotation, than the approval he chose to confess, "under the very nose," as she said, "of this detestable Yankee!"

Still Janey was woman enough to entertain no small amount of curiosity concerning Madame Molinara, and would have been exceedingly unwilling to miss that artist's first appearance. So she dined solemnly by daylight at Mrs. Vandeleur's house, expressly to be in time, but was compelled to forego her lover's attendance, because that gentleman had contracted a previous engagement elsewhere.

Nobody in London gave such pleasant little men-dinners as Dandy Burton. Professing keen interest in Gerard's play, he had long since obtained a promise from author and manager to dine early with him on the first night of its performance, that they might see it afterwards in company. He had reminded Gerard only that morning of his engagement, and the latter had agreed to join the dinner-party at least. Thus much he felt due to his old fellow-pupil, with whom his conscience smote him that he should be unreasonably aggrieved. "I won't throw you over," said he cordially. "I'm off in less than a week, and I don't think I shall ever come to England again." To which the other replied, hypocritically enough, "Good luck to you, my dear fellow, on either side the Atlantic. I trust we shall see you back again before next year's Derby!"

The Dandy, having then secured Dolly Egremont's box, made up his party, ordered a little gem of a dinner for four at "The Vertumnus," and felt his traps were now artfully set and baited; there was nothing more to be done but await the result.

To-night would be his grand *coup*. To-night the appearance on a public stage of Gerard Ainslie's lawful wife could not but fall like a shell amongst the party collected in the

manager's box. "Theresa," indeed, and "Cousin Charlie," might escape unwounded; but for Dolly and his future bride, must not such an exposure produce dismay and confusion of face? For Gerard himself destruction—for Mrs. Vandeleur despair? By that lady's demeanour under the torture he would learn whether a chance existed of his own eventual success. "If not"—he stuck his hands in his pockets, ground an oath between his teeth, and paced across the strangers' room at the Vertumnus—"if not, I must make a bolt of it before Jacobs and his partner—whoever he is, d—n him!—know anything about my movements. In the meantime, why don't these fellows come? They made such a point of being early. Waiter! get dinner directly!"

Egremont and Ainslie arrived together; the latter silent, out of spirits, preoccupied,—the former in a state of intense bustle and excitement, looking so like the Dolly of former days on the eve of some holiday-making frolic, that even Burton's worldly heart warmed to him for the moment, and beat during half a dozen pulsations with the sanguine, sympathetic cordiality of nineteen.

"What a day for Archers!" he exclaimed, shaking each guest by the hand. "Dolly, I read victory on your brow; and as for Jerry here, he looks a cross between Shakespeare and Sheridan. I've nobody to meet you but Tourbillon, and he's always late, so we won't wait a moment."

As if to redeem his character for punctuality, the count entered while he spoke, smiling, radiant, well dressed, looking prosperous, wicked, and on exceedingly good terms with himself. The soup, too, made its appearance; and the four men sat down to get the most out of their short hour and a half before they were due at the theatre.

When people meet, either at dinner or elsewhere, expressly to celebrate a particular event, or discuss a particular subject, I have always remarked the conversation drifts about in every other direction, so that the assemblage often breaks up without having in any way furthered the object for which it was convened. On the present occasion, soup and whitebait were discussed without eliciting anything of greater interest than a late Paris scandal from Tourbillon; but after a lobster *rissole* and second glass of champagne the guests became more talkative, and the Frenchman, turning to Gerard, observed with a meaning air completely lost on the other—

"So you are off again, I understand, to make long voyages, great explorations—to bid farewell to England, to Europe? My faith! I think you are right."

Now, Gerard's first impulse, like that of any other right-thinking person, had prompted him to leave the room the moment Tourbillon entered it. You can't well sit down to dinner with a man who ran away with your wife, even after many years' interval; neither can you reasonably pick a fresh quarrel with him, the old one having been disposed of, because you have both accepted invitations to the same party. It speaks ill for Gerard's frame of mind that with a moment's reflection he dismissed his first idea, and elected to remain. He was so restless, so unhappy, altogether in so excited a state, that he cared little what might happen next, and even looked forward to the possibility of a row arising out of their juxtaposition, into which he could enter with savage zest.

All this Dandy Burton had calculated to a nicety, when he meditated such a solecism as to place these two men at the same table. Anything that should put Gerard "off his head," as the saying is, before the grand final exposure at the theatre, would count very much in favour of his own manœuvres. He was therefore prepared for an explosion, and somewhat disappointed at its failure. The count, it is needless to observe, accepted the situation with his usual good-humoured *sang-froid*, simply addressing Mr. Ainslie as a pleasant acquaintance with whom he was not on very intimate terms.

The latter grew brighter and kindlier under the influence of wine. Even now, in his misery, it rendered him neither morose nor quarrelsome. Something, too, in the absurdity of the whole position struck him as irresistibly comical, and he almost laughed in the Frenchman's face while he replied to his observation. After that, of course, there could be no more question of a quarrel, and they remained perfectly good friends till the dessert.

"I sail this day week," said Gerard cheerfully. "I've got the best-built, best-fitted, best-found barque between London Docks and Deptford. Won't you take a cruise with me, count? I'll give you a berth. Will either of you fellows come? It is but a stone's-throw across the Atlantic, if you're in anything like a craft; and the climate of South America is the finest in the world. Come, won't you be tempted?"

"Who's to take my book on the Leger?" asked Burton, wishing in his heart he might not be compelled to leave England, whether he liked it or not.

"Who's to manage my theatre?" said Dolly, with his mouth full.

"And who is to write plays for it when Monsieur Enslee is gone?" added the count, bowing courteously over the glass he lifted to his lips.

"Plays!" exclaimed the manager. "After to-night no more plays need be written for the British public. I venture to predict that *Pope Clement*, as I have put it on the stage, will be the great triumph of the season. I tell you, I shall be disappointed if it don't run a hundred nights, and go down as good as new into the provinces afterwards."

"Here's success to it!" said Burton. "Give me some champagne. Why, Jerry, who would have thought of your turning out a great dramatic author when we were all at Archer's together! We considered him stupid as a boy, count, I give you my honour. It only shows how people are deceived."

"Monsieur Enslee has seen a great deal since those days," observed Tourbillon. "To dramatise them, a man should have exhausted the passions. It is but anatomy, you see, my friends, studied on the nerves and fibres of the surgeon's own body. How painful, yet how interesting!"

"Not the least painful!" answered Gerard, laughing; "and to the author, at least, anything but interesting. Only a bore, count, while he works at it, and a disappointment when it is finished."

"Ah, bore!" replied the count; "that is an English disease — incurable, irremediable. The philosopher has *migraine*, he has *grippe*, but he knows not what is understood by bore. I think the bore, as you call it, of you authors, is often worn like a pretty woman's veil, to hide the blush of some real feeling that a false shame tells her to suppress."

As far as Ainslie was concerned, the count's arrow reached its mark. Of interest, indeed, in his own plot, he might have none; but it was false to say there was no pain connected with it. Every line, every word, was more or less associated in his mind with the woman he had loved so long, and whom he had determined to see no more. He wished the play at the devil, wished he had never written it, never thought of it! Wished he was fairly across the Atlantic, and the next two months were past! Then something smote at his heart, and told him that henceforth there would be a blank in his life. So he emptied his glass, and called for more champagne.

"We must make the best use of our time," said the host at this juncture. "Dolly is getting fidgety already. He sees an impatient audience, a company without a captain, and a

gallery in overt rebellion. Suppose you got drunk, Dolly, and didn't go at all? What would happen?"

"The supposition involves an impossibility," answered Egremont gravely; "but they'd pull the house down—that's what would happen."

"You don't mean it!" replied the other. "What a lark it would be! Waiter, coffee in five minutes. Just one glass of that old Madeira, and we'll start. I have places, as you know, for you all—Dolly has kindly lent me his box."

"I thank you," said the count; "I shall enter later. I have taken a stall."

"I don't think I shall go," observed Gerard carelessly, and opening his cigar-case.

"Not go!" exclaimed Dolly in accents of unaffected disappointment.

"Not go!" echoed Burton, beholding, as he thought, the whole fabric he had taken such trouble to erect crumbling in pieces.

"You're sure to make a mess of it the first night," argued Gerard. "Grooves stiff—scenes awry—actors nervous—prompter audible—and fiddles out of tune. Besides, how shall I look if they hiss it off the stage?"

"And how shall I look," expostulated Dolly, "if they call for the author and I can't produce him? They'll pull the house down! My dear fellow, you don't know what it is! Under any circumstances, my theatre seems destined to destruction this blessed night! Fifty thou— gone! Well, it might have been worse!"

They all laughed, and Ainslie looked inclined to give way.

"You are right," said the count, who, in the plenitude of his good nature, really wished to spare Gerard the pain in store for him, should he recognise, in the Madame Molinara, from whom so much was expected, his runaway wife. "I shall go late. I am not like our friend here, to whom five minutes' delay must cost fifty thousand pounds. Ah! blagueur! I shall smoke one cigar; you will stay and smoke with me. I tell you, my friend, it is better."

Something admonitory, almost dictatorial, in the count's tone jarred on the other. Ainslie's frame of mind was that in which men start off at a tangent from anything like advice, resenting it as they would coercion.

"I don't see why," he answered rather shortly. "I shall have plenty of time to smoke between this and the Accordion. After all, hang it! I ought to stick by the

manager. I'm ready, Dolly, if you are. Count Tourbillon, I wish you a good-evening."

Burton said not a word. The judicious angler knows when to let his fish alone, giving it line, and suffering it to play itself. The count looked a little surprised, but attributed Gerard's unexpected abruptness to the champagne.

"Il parait qu'il a le vin mauvais. C'est égal!" said he; and, undisturbed by the departure of the others, proceeded to smoke a tranquil cigar in solitude.

CHAPTER LVIII

THE MANAGER'S BOX

THE Accordion, from its front row of stalls to the extreme verge of its gallery under the very roof, was one dense mass of faces, all turned eagerly towards the stage. Play-going people had been subsisting for a long time on musical extravaganzas, of which the extravagance outdid the music; far-fetched burlesques, of little humour and less wit; drowsy readings from Shakespeare; translations ill-translated, and adaptations, worse adapted, from the French. The public were hungry for a real, old-fashioned melodrama once more, with love, murder, glittering swords, stage jewellery, frantic dialogue, and appropriate action. They longed to see the stride, the strut, the stop,—a scowling villain, a daring lover,—a Gothic hall, a moonlit pass,—above all, an injured heroine, now tearful and dishevelled, with pale face and hollow eyes, despairing at the back; anon, radiant in smiles, white satin, and imitation pearls, exulting before the footlights, victorious over insult and oppression, triumphantly to vindicate the first principle of stage morality, that "Beauty can do no wrong."

This starving public, then — through the medium of posters, newspaper advertisements, men in cardboard extinguishers, and other modes of legitimate puffing—had been informed that its cravings were at last to be satisfied, in a grand, new, original melodrama called *Pope Clement; or, the Cardinal's Collapse.* Critics whispered one another that this was none of your foreign plagiarisms, altered only in costume and language, but a real novelty—startling of action, replete with incident, and—well—yes, it had been pruned to a certain extent, for in these days, you understand, an author cannot be too careful. But, although the moral was doubtless unimpeachable, some of the situations might seem, perhaps, to an English audience, a little—what shall we say? —unusual, but nothing the least indelicate—far from it. Can

we wonder that the famished public rushed incontinently to their meal?

Dolly Egremont, too, who had learned his trade by this time pretty perfectly, kept up the right amount of mystery regarding his American actress, identifying her skilfully enough with the new melodrama in which she was to appear. He also told several friends, under promise of inviolable secrecy—a manner of advertising only second to the columns of the *Times*—that this much-talked-of piece was the production of their acquaintance, Gerard Ainslie, who, from feelings of modesty, did not wish his name to be made known; that it was by far the best thing out for many years; that even the actors at rehearsal could not forbear their applause; that the dresses had cost him three times as much as dresses ever cost a treasury before; and that soft music would play continuously throughout the whole action of the piece.

A thrilling drama—a new actress—a dandy playwright—and a liberal manager! What more could be desired? The bait took, the public were tempted, and the house filled. Dolly Egremont, peeping through a hole in the curtain, positively shook with mingled nervousness and delight while he scanned the overflow, and reflected that his check-takers were still driving supplicants away unsatisfied from the doors.

There was one part of the house, however, on which the loving eye of cupidity, even in a manager, could linger without counting profits or returns. For a few seconds it rested on his own box, and Dolly Egremont forgot that the world or the theatre contained an object besides Jane Tregunter, dressed in pink—a colour which to other eyes than a lover's might have appeared a little too bright for her complexion, a little too juvenile for her years.

It is with that box we also have to do. Let us imagine ourselves impalpable, invisible, jammed into a corner under the peg on which the White Rose has hung up her burnoose. She has taken a place in front, farthest removed from the stage; perhaps because there is a nook behind it containing the worst seat in the box, and likely therefore to remain vacant the longest. No chance is so minute as to be neglected in a woman's calculations. Mrs. Vandeleur looks very pale, and her manner is more restless than usual, while the gloved hand that holds her opera-glasses would shake ridiculously but for her clenching it so tight. All the party have not yet arrived. Cousin Charlie, indeed, an ensign in the Guards, has made his appearance, and already told them

the whole plot and history of the play, with comments of his own, facetious, not to say disrespectful; for Charlie, like many of his kind, possesses unflagging spirits, any amount of that self-reliant quality which the rising generation call "cheek," imperturbable good-humour, very little sympathy with anything or anybody, and no faculty of veneration whatever. "Theresa," ten years older than himself—which, after all, scarcely makes her thirty—takes him up, as she calls it, and pets him considerably; laughing at his nonsense while encouraging his impertinence, treating him with a regard almost as demonstrative as she shows towards her bullfinch, and with about as much respect as she entertains for her poodle!

Miss Tregunter, because she disapproves of Dolly's connection with the Accordion, superintends the whole ceremony, as it were, under protest, yet cannot but feel a certain accession of dignity in her own position, and has never perhaps looked on theatrical matters with so indulgent an eye as to-night.

Cousin Charlie disappears to return with half a dozen playbills, which he distributes, not without buffoonery, venturing even to address a far-fetched witticism to Norah, but recoiling a good deal chilled from the cold, absent expression of that lady's face, who has not indeed heard a syllable, to take refuge with Theresa, and whisper in her willing ear that "Mrs. V. has got her back up about something, and he can guess why, but he isn't going to say."

The orchestra strikes up. A child in the gallery begins to cry; its removal in such a crowd is no more possible than to take away the great glittering chandelier from the middle of the roof. An unfeeling joker suggests, "Throw it over!" The audience cry "Hush!"—"Silence!"—"Order!" Fainter and fainter the fiddles die off; the music sinks and swells and sinks again, into harmony such as an imaginative mind, predisposed by the play-bills, might fancy the resemblance of a morning breeze; and with a fresh burst, which Norah, preoccupied as she is, thinks not unlike something she has heard long ago in David's symphony of *The Desert*, the curtain rises on a "Sunrise in the Campagna"—wide plains, distant mountains, classic ruins, white oxen, flat-capped women, peasants cross-gartered, garlands, grapes, and garnishing all complete.

The scene reflects great credit on the stage carpenters. The audience, prepared to be pleased, applaud loudly. Norah's thoughts have travelled back, Heaven knows why,

to the marshes about Ripley, and the box-door opening, with considerable bustle, announces a fresh arrival. By no small effort she concentrates her whole attention on the play.

She has quite lost the clue to its opening, nevertheless. Already the peasants have dispersed; the scene has changed to a street in Rome, where a typically developed monk, with round stomach and red nose, is accepting a purse of zecchins —ringing and chinking with a rich luxuriance money never seems to possess in real life—from "a Gallant" (no other word expresses the character), wearing a black mask, long boots, a wide hat, a drooping feather, an ample cloak, and huge spurs that jingle as he walks.

Mrs. Vandeleur's ear, quickened by anxiety, recognises a man's heavier tread close behind her. Pooh! it's only Mr. Burton! She turns to shake hands with him civilly and even cordially. What does it matter? What does anything matter now? The Dandy's manner is perfect of its kind— guarded, conventional, the least thing penitent; interested, yet exceedingly respectful.

"Thank you so much for coming," is all he says, and proceeds, gracefully enough, to pay his respects to the other ladies in the box. Heavy and sore at heart, Norah turns her face once more towards the stage.

"You must listen to this," observes Burton, for the general benefit; "it's almost the best thing in the play. I'm so glad we're in time. I know Dolly's on tenter-hooks now. He would never have forgiven us if we had missed it."

By twos, and fours, and sixes the manager's whole force, supernumeraries and all, are trooping on the stage. Great masses of red and white group themselves artistically in the old Roman street, over which a judicious arrangement of gas sheds all the warmth and glare of real Italian sunshine. It is impossible to detect where the human figures end and the painted crowd begins. Deeper and deeper that gorgeous phalanx gathers, and still, by a waving movement never discontinued, the effect is gained of an ever-increasing multitude massed together in the streets and squares of a city. Processions of white-robed priests and acolytes wind in stately measure through the midst; censers are swinging, choristers chanting, waving banners and massive croziers are borne to the front. It is the great scenic triumph of the play, and a burst of grand music appropriately heralds its exhibition to the audience. While she looks and listens, Norah's heart seems very full; but a quiet sensation of repose steals over her, and she attributes it, perhaps, to the influence

of those exalted strains, rather than to an instinctive consciousness of his presence whom she still so dearly loves.

His sleeve just touches her shoulder as he slides into that vacant seat in the dark corner which nobody has thought it worth while to occupy. He has come in very quietly after Burton, and the attention of the whole party being riveted on the stage, his arrival remains unnoticed. How is it that Norah knows Gerard Ainslie is within a foot of her before she dare turn her face to look—that face no longer pale, but blushing crimson to the temples? He does not see it. He sees nothing but a dazzling vision of lavender and black lace and grey gloves, and a white flower nestling in coils of golden chestnut hair; but he is conscious that the blood is rushing wildly to his own brow, and his heart aches with a keen thrilling sensation of delight, utterly unreasonable, and actually painful in its intensity.

Author as he is too—the first night of his play and all—yet has he quite forgotten drama, theatre, actors, the manager's anxiety, his own literary fame, and the ostensible reason for his being there. This is no imaginary sorrow, that must henceforth darken all his future; no fictitious passion that has endured through his whole past, that still so completely enslaves him; he is trembling with a mad causeless happiness even now.

Their whispered greeting was of the coldest, the most common-place, but something in the tone of each struck the same chord, called forth the same feeling. Their eyes met, and in an instant Norah slid her hand in his, while both felt that in spite of doubt, anxiety, alienation, so much that had seemed harsh, unjust, inexplicable, their true feelings remained unchanged, unchangeable.

Mrs. Vandeleur dared not trust her voice, and Gerard was the first to speak. His face looked very sad, and his tone, though kindly, was sorrowful in the extreme.

"I'm so glad to have seen you again to-night. But I should not—I could not have sailed without wishing you good-bye."

"Sailed!" she gasped. "Good-bye! What do you mean? Where are you going, and when?"

"To South America," he answered simply. "We shall be at sea in less than a week."

All this in a low subdued voice, but they could have spoken out loud had they pleased, for burst after burst of applause now shook the very walls of the theatre, and excited spectators waving fans, handkerchiefs, opera-glasses, rose

tumultuously in their places, to welcome the great American actress, at this moment making her first appearance before a British public.

From his ill-contrived corner Gerard could see so little of the performance that he might indeed have left the box without further enlightenment, but that Mrs. Vandeleur, hurt, confused, dismayed, could think of nothing better than to make room for him, and direct his attention to the stage.

The scene, representing the confessional of a cathedral, left nothing to be desired in architectural grandeur and florid decoration. Madame Molinara, as Violante, about to relieve her conscience from a heavy list of theatrical sins, came forward with peculiar dignity of gait and gesture, enveloped from head to foot in a long white veil. Even Mrs. Vandeleur could not have recognised her under its folds. Gerard applauded like the rest, and observed to his companion, "You can see she is an actress by the way she walks across the stage!"

Round after round, the well-trained artist sustained that deafening applause without being tempted to destroy the illusion of the piece by abandoning her dramatic character; but at length the enthusiasm reached such a height, that to delay its acknowledgment would have seemed alike uncourteous and ungrateful. The star came forward to the footlights, raised her veil, and executed a curtsey to the very ground.

Then, indeed, the excitement became a tumult. A storm of bouquets burst upon the stage, besides one that fell short of its mark, and only reached the big drum in the orchestra. Shouts of *brava!* resounded from pit and boxes, while repeated calls on the band to strike up "Yankee-Doodle" pealed from the gallery; but through it all there came to Norah's ear a hoarse whisper, as of one in extremity of pain, and every syllable smote like a knell upon her heart.

"Believe me," it said, "I did not know of this. You must feel I could never have so insulted you. It is well I am to leave England. My own—my only love—may God in heaven bless you. We shall never meet again!"

And this while Cousin Charlie and Theresa and the others, three feet off, were laughing and jesting and criticising the new actress—her eyes, her arms, her ankles, the depth of her curtsey, and the general turn of her draperies.

Norah heard the box-door shut, and then lights, audience, stage, pit, boxes, all seemed to swim before her eyes.

"Mr. Burton," said she in a faint voice, putting out her

hand, with that helpless gesture of entreaty peculiar to the blind, "will you take me out? I desired my carriage to wait. Would you mind asking for it? The gas or something makes me feel ill." And so, rejecting every kindly offer of assistance and companionship pressed on her by Theresa and Miss Tregunter, Norah left the box, and descended the private staircase of the theatre, arm-in-arm with the man she most disliked in London, conscious only that she was vaguely grateful to somebody, it mattered not to whom, for the relief it afforded her to get away.

CHAPTER LIX

EXIT

FOR the convenience of its manager, the Accordion possessed a private door, opening on a quiet narrow street, and here Mrs. Vandeleur's carriage was found in waiting according to orders. The fresh air revived its mistress almost immediately. She implored Burton to rejoin his party without delay, a request that gentleman had the good taste to accord at once, congratulating himself, it must be admitted, that so far at least his scheme had been tolerably successful.

Returning to the box, he found Gerard Ainslie too had vanished. Nobody else was sufficiently anxious about Mrs. Vandeleur to press him with further questions, when he observed quietly, "She was suffering from a bad headache, so he had packed her up in her carriage and sent her home." In truth, these, like the rest of the spectators, could spare attention for nothing but the all-engrossing business of the stage.

The long-drawn aisles of its scenic cathedral had been darkened so skilfully as to convey an idea of dim religious grandeur, and vast architectural space. A few wax-tapers twinkled through the gloom. Violante, her white veil fallen from her brow, her black hair dishevelled on her shoulders, knelt with clasped hands and wild imploring eyes before the love-stricken Cardinal, while enumerating the catalogue of her sins. It was to the credit of our old friend Mr. Bruff,—we beg his pardon, Mr. Barrington-Belgrave,—that although he recognised her at rehearsal, he had respected the incognita of his former pupil. It was also to his credit that on the present occasion he abstained from his customary rant. The tones of repressed passion in which he addressed her as "my daughter," the shiver, admirably controlled, that shook him from head to heel, when she besought his blessing, must have elicited its meed of applause then and there, but for the invincible attraction of the penitent herself. Those low tones of hers, from which intense power of histrionic genius had

purged all provincialism of expression or accent, vibrated to every heart; and many an eye was wet with tears, while the whisper—for it was scarcely more than a whisper—thrilled through the whole house, that told how the beautiful Italian struggled with her sin, and her despair.

> So when entreaty comes,
> Not like an angel, all in robes of light,
> Nor hero nodding from a golden car;
> But earthly troubled, weary, worn, and sad,
> Yet for defeat the prouder;—and the eyes,
> The haunting eyes, draw tears from out my heart,
> Pleading an endless, hopeless, wordless grief;
> Must I not pity, Father?

Well, it is not with her we have to do, with the successful actress in the crowded, lighted theatre, holding hundreds entranced by the recital of her fictitious woes. No. It is with the lonely suffering woman outside in the dark deserted street, pressing her temples hard against the cushions of her carriage, weeping bitter tears in solitude, yet not so bitter as to flow unmingled with a spring of consolation in the thought that, now as ever, for good and evil, in spite of all that had come and gone, through shame, sorrow, and separation, her image was still cherished, still worshipped, still beloved!

Yes, it was impossible to mistake those tones of passionate, heart-felt despair in which he bade her farewell. Not the most consummate power of acting, not his own wife's, could have feigned the quiet weariness of desolation that spoke in every one of those half-dozen words. Her tears flowed faster while she recalled their tender, unreproachful sadness, their meek, undying love, and brain grew clearer, heart stouter, as she wept on. He should not part like this! No, not if she waited in that dismal street all night! Of womanly reserve and womanly pride the White Rose cherished more than her share. To a presuming suitor none could, nor would, have dealt a shrewder rebuff; but here was an emergency in which, to the false shame of a moment, might be sacrificed the repose —more, the very purpose of a lifetime. She must go mad, she felt, if he went away without her seeing him again, to ask what had happened? how she had offended him? why this change had grown up between them? and to tell him that, though she was well satisfied to lose him for ever, because of justice and right, nothing here, nor hereafter—no, not a hundred wives—should drive him from the place he had always held (yes, always! though she had been so cruelly false to him), and always should hold in her heart.

After that, she thought, it would be much easier to give

him up, and perhaps in time this woman would amend, and make him a devoted wife. Far off in the future might be a life of success, usefulness, and even domestic comfort, for Gerard; while, for herself!—well, it mattered little what became of her. She was no Roman Catholic, or the refuge would have occurred to her of a cloister. At present poor Norah felt as if she could never be at rest but in the tomb.

Meanwhile she waited on, watching the door from which she expected Gerard every moment to emerge. And, though while she so eagerly desired it, she half dreaded the interview as positively their last, time lengthened itself out till she began to feel growing on her senses the unrealised horror, the vague apprehension of a dream. Suddenly, with a start, she thrust her delicate, bare head from the carriage window, and observed that a couple of foot-passengers had stopped midway in the crossing at the end of the street. Their faces looked very pale under a glare of gaslight; their attitudes expressed curiosity and consternation. Great-coated policemen, too, hurried rapidly past, vouchsafing no answer to the eager inquiries poured on them. Presently the trampling of many footsteps rained along the adjacent street, and smothered, scuffling noises came from the theatre itself. Then, even ere Norah could frame the idea suddenly presented to her mind, it was substantiated by that thrilling cry which, more than any other alarm, seems to paralyse the boldest hearts, habituated to every other extremity of danger. "Fire! fire!" was shouted, loud and clear. She could not be mistaken; she was sure of it before the startling words had been taken up and re-echoed by a hundred voices. Listening with strained, horror-stricken attention, Norah could hear a suppressed stir and bustle inside the theatre, rising to wild tumultuous confusion, and subsiding again as quickly in an unaccountable calm, while over all arose long, swelling bursts of harmony from the grand, majestic music of the march in *Faust*.

Robert Smart, in attendance on his mistress, turned a very white, helpless face towards the carriage window, and it is possible that at this juncture may have dawned on him some vague intention of going to inquire what had happened. If so, it was put to immediate flight by the appearance, at the manager's door, of the manager himself, pale as death, haggard, disordered, trembling all over, yet preserving that presence of mind which seldom deserts those who are accustomed to trust in their own resources and to act for themselves. His hair, whiskers, and eyelashes were singed,

his gloves and dress discoloured, scorched, and smelling strongly of fire; about him, too, there clung a faint, fearful odour as of roasted flesh. Utterly aghast though he looked, into his eyes came a gleam of satisfaction when they rested on the carriage. "How providential!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Vandeleur, a frightful accident has happened. They are bringing it out here."

It! was there no hope then? Her heart stopped beating while he spoke; but she leapt out unhesitating, and intimated to him—more in dumb show than words—that her carriage should be at his and the sufferer's disposal. Ere he could thank her, Gerard Ainslie, Mr. Bruff, and two more actors—these three still in the costumes of the parts they had been playing—moved heavily and carefully through the doorway, bearing amongst them, covered over with a cloak, a shapeless bundle of rags, shreds, stage jewellery, and human suffering, that had been a beautiful woman and a consummate actress but ten minutes ago!

Making room for these on the pavement, Mrs. Vandeleur was touched by Gerard's shoulder as he passed. She did not yet understand the catastrophe, though it was a relief to learn that he, at least, seemed safe. "Who is it?" she asked; and even at such a time the well-known voice caused him to turn his head. "It is my wife," he answered, and she found herself thinking she had never heard him speak in that strange, hoarse tone before. "Gerard," she whispered very softly, and laid her hand unconsciously on his shoulder, "every moment is precious! Take her home at once to my house."

A doctor was already in attendance. He and Gerard lifted the poor actress, now moaning feebly in extremity of pain, into the carriage, while Norah—roused to all her natural energy under pressure of emergency—hailed a passing hansom, wound herself into it just as she was, with bare head and evening dress, to dash home and get everything ready, only pausing an instant for the despatch of Robert Smart, who recovered his wits slowly, in another direction, to secure fresh advice and more assistance.

So poor Fanny was carried helplessly off to the very house of all others in London which, perhaps, she would have been most loth to enter of her own free will, and Gerard Ainslie found himself, under a new and frightful complication of circumstances, crossing once more that well-known threshold, at which he had thought to lay down, once for all, every hope of happiness he had cherished upon earth.

CHAPTER LX

AFTER LONG YEARS

DAY after day poor Fanny lingered on, suffering less, perhaps, of physical pain than if her case had been more hopeless from the first. Doctors looked grave, and shook their heads, but ordered brandy, stimulants, opiates, nevertheless; everything to relieve pain, to arouse vitality, and to sustain strength. Still she pined and faded gradually away, lying for hours together in a state of utter unconsciousness and stupor, varied at intervals, farther and farther apart, by a vague longing restlessness that produced fever and exhaustion. She could only speak in whispers, and even such weak efforts were attended with considerable exertion, but her large black eyes, glowing and beautiful with the light that is kindled in some other world than this, would follow Norah about the sickroom, with a touching wistful gaze that seemed to implore forgiveness, while it expressed remorse, gratitude, and affection.

Mrs. Vandeleur scarcely left her side, and, indeed, the poor sufferer grew very desponding and querulous when she missed the gentle touch that anticipated all her wants, and the kind loving eyes that never looked upon her but with sympathy, forgiveness, and compassion.

Here were two women, each of whom had injured the other in her dearest hopes, her deepest and most sacred affections; but one had learned those lessons of resignation and self-sacrifice by which mortals must be trained for immortality. And the other was even now trembling on a shore where much that seemed so necessary in her journey was to be discarded and abandoned as but vain incumbrance for her future voyage on the silent sea—so vague, so dark, so cold, so terrible to all. Yet over its dreary surface is there not shed a light from the shining form of Him who walks upon the waters and stretches out a hand to save the weakest of us ere we sink into an unfathomable deep?

These two had forgiven each other their injuries, as they

hoped themselves to be forgiven. There was nothing between them now but peace, and confidence, and goodwill. I suppose if patients were doctors they, too, would err on the side of timidity, and shrink with professional caution from anything in the shape of responsibility. The best advice in London forbade all excitement as most injurious to the sufferer, and peremptorily interdicted Fanny from the visits of her husband. At last, however, on one occasion, when, after an exceedingly bad night, the invalid had prayed very earnestly for a few minutes' conversation with Gerard, three wise men, whose faces looked wiser and more solemn than usual, announced that her petition might be granted, and then Mrs. Vandeleur knew that there was no longer any hope.

It lasted but a short time, that interview between husband and wife, the first for long years of separation, never to be repeated here on earth. No one else was present, and mutual forgiveness, penitence, reconciliation, whatever took place, remained, as they ought to remain, without witness and without record; only, weak as she was, Fanny's tones could be heard uninterrupted for many minutes consecutively, as if she were arguing and expostulating on some subject very near her heart, so that when Gerard left the room, pale, trembling, with tearful eyes, and she called him back once more to her bedside, the last words she ever spoke to her husband were heard plainly by, at least, one mourning listener, through the half-closed door—

"Then you've promised, dear, and I'm easy. It's the only way to undo all the harm I've done you; and you'll be happy, Gerard, never fear. You're young still, you know—young for a man. And I couldn't have made you the right sort of wife—not if it was ever so. I wasn't brought up to it. And, Gerard, dear, in Ripley churchyard, as I said, close to father—d'ye mind? I'm tired now—I think I'll take a sleep. God bless you, Gerard! Perhaps I'll see you to-morrow—perhaps, dear, I'll never see you again!"

. . . . . .

It is easy to understand how a lady of Miss Tregunter's wealth, fashion, and general pretensions could only be married at such a church as St. George's or St. James's, and of these she elected the latter, in consequence, I imagine, of some technical necessity connected with her bridegroom's residence in that parish. Of bridesmaids, I understand, she had exactly four couple, though why so large an escort should have been requisite, what were the duties of these beautiful auxiliaries, or how far the bride derived moral

support from their presence, I am at a loss to conjecture. There they were, nevertheless, all in pink, decorated, besides, with ornaments of rubies, precisely similar in pattern, presented by the bridegroom.

Miss Tregunter herself was obliged to abandon her favourite colour, in compliance with the dictates of an over-fastidious civilisation, but preserved as much of it as possible in her cheeks, so that when she dropped her veil, Burton, who was best man on the occasion, felt forcibly reminded of the lace-covered toilet-table in her dressing-room, as he beheld it when admitted with other hymeneal officials to a public view of her *trousseau* laid out in that apartment.

The Dandy was free from his difficulties after all, and had escaped far better than he deserved. There are men in the world, more than we generally suppose, for whom it is an impossibility to hit an enemy when he is down, and Gerard Ainslie was one of them. During Fanny's illness this gentleman could not, of course, leave England, as he had originally intended, and the disposal, at considerable loss, of the district he had purchased in South America, with the sale of that well-found barque, *The White Rose*, letter A, No. 1, entered at Lloyd's clinker-built and copper-fastened, besides full freight and provisions lying on board of her in London Docks, put him in possession of a large sum of ready money, for which he believed he could find no more fitting use than to extricate Burton from his most pressing liabilities, thus, to use Dolly Egremont's expression, "setting him on his legs again, though the beggar didn't deserve it, and giving him one more chance to be a man or a mouse!"

There was but little of the sentimental in Mr. Burton's composition; but his wonted eloquence deserted him when he grasped the friend's hand whom he had injured so cruelly, and tried to thank him, with dry lips and a knot in his throat. For once his heart was too full to speak.

He made a capital best man for Dolly though, nevertheless, arranging all the details and ceremonious observances of the wedding, with a tact that seems especially accorded by nature to those who are predestined to remain bachelors themselves. The cake with its ring and thimble was ordered, and I believe compounded under his directions. The lawyers were hastened, the licence was procured, the clergyman advertised, the wedding-feast provided, and the invitations were sent out. Not the most distant relation of the bride or bridegroom was omitted, and I have been unable to learn that anybody took offence at the slightest neglect or want

of deference during the whole proceedings, so that when Theresa in the vestry signed her name to the register with a flourish, just below "Cousin Charles," she was justified in affirming that through the whole course of her experience she had never been concerned in so orderly, so well-conducted, and altogether so decorous a wedding!

They were likely to be indeed a happy couple; and every one of their friends wished them well. None more so than a man in deep mourning passing down the street, as the last carriage with its liveried servants, brilliant in bouquets and white favours, set its freight of beauty down at the church door. His dress denoted that he had lately sustained some domestic bereavement, but on Gerard Ainslie's brow might be traced a joyous expression of hope and confidence, such as it had not worn since the days of Marston Rectory and Ripley Marshes, long ago. In his eyes had come that light which the poet tells us was "never yet on sea or land," but which most of us have seen at some period of our lives, in the eyes we best love to look on here below, that we humbly hope may shine on us unchanged in heaven hereafter.

The association of ideas, the links on which thought follows thought, as wave succeeds to wave, and the tendency to speak aloud when none but ourselves can hear, are amongst the eccentricities of reason, the most eccentric, the most unreasonable. Turning into St. James's Street, a crossing-sweeper, on whom he bestowed a shilling, was the only listener to Gerard's unconnected thanksgiving.

"What have I done to deserve to be so happy? How can I ever hope to be worthy of her? I suppose my darling will have to be married in a bonnet, when the year is out. She surely won't insist on waiting longer than that?"

And Norah didn't!

THE END

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